

THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER®

TECH REPORT

**BITCOIN'S
FATAL FLAW**
COULD A POWERFUL
PC KILL CRYPTO?

EXCLUSIVE

PATHFINDER
WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

HOW MANY RPGS LET
YOU RIDE A RAPTOR
INTO BATTLE?

WORLD EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

DARKEST DUNGEON 2

A ROGUELIKE ROAD TRIP TO
CANCEL THE APOCALYPSE

FUTURE

ISSUE 358

HARDWARE

**GAMING
MONITORS**

WHY YOUR GAMES
DESERVE WILD
REFRESH RATES

**EXPEDITIONS:
ROME PREVIEW**

SWORDS, SANDALS,
AND SLICK STRATEGY

**DIABLO 2:
RESURRECTED**

A NEW LIFE FOR AN
INFERNAL CLASSIC





CyberPowerPC recommends Windows.

One experience for everything in your life.



Infinity X109 GT



Intel® Core™ i9-10850K



MSI GeForce® RTX 3080 10GB



FROM
£2449



Infinity X99 GT



Intel® Core™ i9-9900K



MSI GeForce® RTX 3070 8GB



FROM
£1949



Infinity X107 Elite



Intel® Core™ i7-10700KF



MSI GeForce® RTX 3060 12GB



FROM
£1599



Infinity X97 Elite



Intel® Core™ i7-9700KF



MSI GeForce® RTX 3060 12GB



FROM
£1349



Infinity X95 Elite



Intel® Core™ i5-9400F



MSI GeForce® GTX 1660
SUPER 6GB



FROM
£949



Tracer III Evo HDR-600



Intel® Core™ i7-9750H



NVIDIA® GeForce® RTX 2060
6GB



FROM
£949



CUSTOM BUILD **GAMING PCs**
WWW.CYBERPOWERSYSTEM.CO.UK



5 Year
Warranty



Free UK
Delivery



Next Day
Delivery



Award
Winning PCs

Follow Us!   @CYBERPOWERUK  @CYBERPOWER_UK |  @CYBERPOWER

Order today!  sales@cyberpowersystem.co.uk  03333-237776

All information correct at the time of printing. Subject to change.



A PlayStation Store gift card. The card is blue and white. At the top left is a small Union Jack flag. At the top right is the value '£10'. The PlayStation logo is prominently displayed in the center. Below the logo is the 'PlayStation Store' logo, which includes a small shopping bag icon. At the bottom, the text reads 'For the latest games, movies and TV shows'.

A PlayStation Store £20 card. The card is blue and white, featuring the PlayStation logo, the PlayStation Store icon, and the text 'PlayStation.Store' and 'For the latest games, movies and TV shows'.



PlayStation.Plus

THE PERFECT GIFT, EVERY TIME

© 2020 Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc. "PlayStation" and the PS Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment, Inc. Also, "PS Vita"™ and "PS Move" are trademarks of the same company. "SONY" and "PS" are registered trademarks of Sony Corporation. "Sony Entertainment Network" is a trademark of the same company. All rights, titles, content, publisher names, trademarks, artwork and associated imagery are trademarks and/or copyright material of their respective owners. All rights reserved.

Powered by:  Incomm

PC GAMER

#358 JULY 2021

Future Publishing Ltd
Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com

facebook.com
/pcgamermagazineyoutube.com
/pcgamertwitter.com
/pcgamertwitch.tv
/pcgamer**PC GAMER**
Forum

forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER
SHOW
pcgaming
show.com

All contents © 2021 Future Publishing Limited or published under license. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 206885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact the manufacturer and retailer directly with regard to the purchase of products or services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: June 24, 2021

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you acknowledge that Future and its licensee(s) to publish your submission in whole or in part in any all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format, published electronically and/or associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all responsibility for material in this publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socio-economic standards. The manufacturing process will and is certified by FSC and PEFC certification and accreditation.

abcApproved by
Audited
12,708
January
December 2020**ipso.**For press freedom
with responsibility**FUTURE**Connectors.
Creators.
Experience
Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive: Zillah Byng-Thorne
Non-executive chairman: Richard Huntingford
Chief financial officer: Penny Leith-Brown
Tel: +44 (0)1225 442 244

"IT'S GOT A HOPEFUL STREAK. WE COULD ALL USE ONE OF THOSE"

**ROBIN VALENTINE**
Twitter
@robinvalentine

This month
Was reminded of a lot of gruelling, apocalyptic journeys to the supermarket this year.

a sequel so exciting we couldn't resist putting it on the cover. It's a big departure – it's a road trip, it's a roguelike, and, most radically of all, it's got a hopeful streak. We could all use one of those in 2021, eh?

Robin

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p60

The PC Gamer team



WES FENLON
Twitter
@wesleyfenlon

This month
Covering games about the apocalypse and a time loop has been nostalgic for lockdown life.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Twitter
@screenecuisse

This month
Got to meet the stars of Mythic Quest! Of course, they just wanted to talk about Switch games.



ANDY KELLY
Twitter
@ultrabright

This month
Reviewed the tall vampire lady game and spent most of this time looking at labels. (See p130.)



FRASER BROWN
Twitter
@FraserBrown

This month
Tried to break his Crusader Kings habit by playing basically the same thing but set in space.

PC Gamer, ISSN 1365-3540, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA, UK. The US annual subscription price is \$24.97 (air freight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc, 150-15, 33rd St, Jamaica, NY 11431, USA). Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11205. US POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, World Container Inc, 150-15, 33rd St, Jamaica, NY 11431, USA. Subscription orders are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Richmond House, Perrywood Road, Havering Heath, West Sussex, RH6 3DH, UK.

Contents

#358
JULY 2021

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p60



Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

How did Respawn become the first games developer to win an Oscar?

10 THE SPY

The latest rumours dissected by our resident secret agent.

12 SPECIAL REPORT

We chat to the talented people behind the TV show Mythic Quest.

14 POSITIVE INFLUENCE

Driver creator Martin Edmondson shares his inspirations...

16 DNA TRACING

...and we look back on the winding history of his studio, Reflections.

Previews

20 Expeditions: Rome

24 Diablo II: Resurrected

26 Last Stop

28 Gord

30 12 Minutes

32 Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous

36 Let's Build a Zoo

38 Sky Beneath

40 War Mongrels

EARLY ACCESS

42 Kynseed

44 We Are the Caretakers

46 Dorfromantik

48 Star Dynasties

Features

50 Darkest Dungeon II

62 Mortal Kombat film review

50



20 EXPEDITIONS: ROME

The latest game in this series of historical RPGs takes us on a world tour of the ancient world.

50 DARKEST DUNGEON II

The end of the world has arrived – what better time for a road trip with your (sort of) friends?

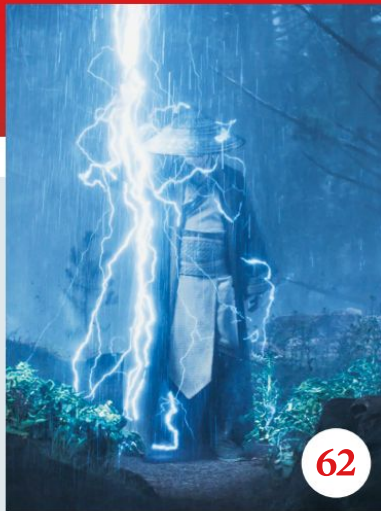
62 MORTAL KOMBAT

Does the film adaptation do right by the beloved game series? And, er, is it good? Time to find out.

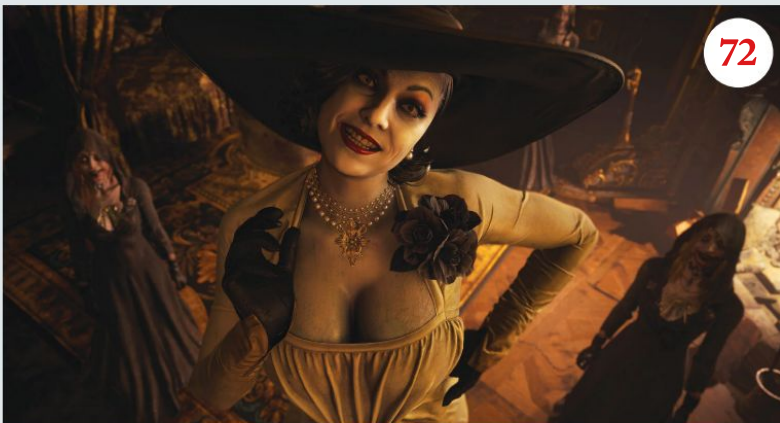
20



62



72



96



124



72 RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

We've finally met the tall vampire lady, and we have thoughts on the game she lives in.

96 GAMING MONITORS

Why does a high refresh rate matter? And what monitors do it best? Find out inside.

124 BROKEN SWORD

Andy reinstalls the classic first game in the series and holds it up to the harsh light of 2021. Does the globe-trotting adventure hold up? How about that goat puzzle?

Reviews

72 Resident Evil Village

78 Nier Replicant

80 Hitchhiker

82 Silicon Dreams

84 MotoGP 21

86 Quantum League

88 Smelter

FREE GAMES

90 If On a Winter's Night, Four Travelers

91 Nojong

91 Beasts of Mehetia

THEY'RE BACK

92 Sea of Thieves

93 Soma

93 Abzu

93 Song of the Deep

93 Megaquarium

Hardware

96 GROUP TEST

100 TECH REPORT

102 BUYER'S GUIDE

Extra Life

106 NOW PLAYING

Teaching a toddler to play *Elite*.

110 UPDATE

Hitman 3's sinful new missions.

112 MOD SPOTLIGHT

Keep *New Vegas* weird.

116 HOW TO

Surviving without new graphics cards.

118 DIARY

Dishonored 2, ruled by dice.

122 WHY I LOVE

The joy of hammers.

124 REINSTALL

Trouble with the Templars.

128 MUST PLAY

Eight games Nat thinks you should try.



MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



We didn't think Respawn's VR shooter was particularly award-winning.

THE WINNER IS...

Respawn becomes the first game developer to win an Oscar

If I asked you which game developer you'd consider Oscar-worthy, how would you respond. Maybe one of Sony's 'prestige' first-party studios? Perhaps a narrative-heavy developer like Telltale or Dontnod, or a triple-A powerhouse like EA or Ubisoft? Instead, the academy has chosen to award Respawn Entertainment with the prestigious award – and it wasn't even for the wall-running FPS series it's known for.

Colette, a short documentary following a 90-year-old French Resistance fighter as she visits the

German concentration camp where her brother was killed, won the Oscar for Best Documentary (Short Subject) at this year's Academy Awards. It's a fantastic short, exploring pained family dynamics, resistance, and the brutality of Nazi rule in a tight 20 minutes. But it's

also an unlockable videogame extra, originally released as one of many supplementary short films produced for Respawn's VR shooter *Medal of Honor: Above and Beyond*.

Respawn and Oculus collaborated to produce the documentary, with Respawn CEO Vince Zampella even named as an executive co-producer. This makes Colette's win not only the first awarded to a games studio, but also the first for Oculus parent company Facebook. Of course, it's also particularly strange given that *Medal of Honor: Above and Beyond* simply wasn't a very good game – certainly not one anyone would expect to win an Academy Award.

**A DOCUMENTARY
FOLLOWING A
90-YEAR-OLD FRENCH
RESISTANCE FIGHTER**

SONY'S GAMING BOT

MACHINE LEARNING



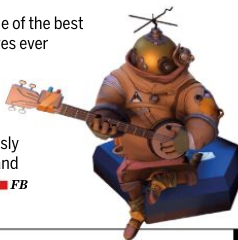
Sony recently patented an artificial intelligence bot designed to play games for you. The bot will monitor and then mimic the player's inputs, giving the user the option of letting the artificial intelligence take over. Pretty handy if you need a break but don't want to ruin your winning streak. ■ **RW**

OUTER WILDS DLC

EYE SEE YOU



Outer Wilds is one of the best cosmic adventures ever made, so I'm thrilled to see it's continuing. 'Echo of the Eye' was spotted on SteamDB, followed by some sly teasing from the developer and publisher. DLC seems likely. ■ **FB**



EVGA

CHEEKY GPU GAINS



With GPUs flying off shelves faster than you can say "that one has a nice shroud", you take what you can. But those loyal to EVGA can rise above the rabble. Elite Membership grants 24 hours pre-launch access to new hardware, along with sweet deals and even an associates program. ■ **KW**



ABOVE, TOP: Colette follows a former French Resistance fighter as she visits Germany for the first time since the war.

ABOVE, BOTTOM: Sorry, *Mirage* – Respawn's first Oscar wasn't for you.

OSCAR BRAVO

The studio is, naturally, over the moon at the news. On receiving the nomination, Respawn composer Stephen Barton exclaimed, "Most film companies don't get Oscar nominated within their first decade of existence. Most never get one. Respawn just became the first game studio ever to be nominated."

But even if the award isn't for Respawn's own work, the studio managed to use its VR shooter to platform the work of director Anthony Giacchino, teams of researchers, and the lived experiences of Colette Marin-Catherine. Maybe *Above and Beyond* was a bit naff – but if the *Medal of Honor* Gallery can host and fund historical artefacts and documentary footage that's not only good, but Oscar-worthy, then perhaps that doesn't matter.

Of course, the real question is whether (ignoring the fact that games aren't films) a game itself could ever be considered Oscar-worthy. Now that Respawn's got its foot in the door, will we see *Titanfall 2*'s tale of man and robot recognised by the Academy? Will *Apex Legends*' next season finally give *Mirage* the golden statue it deserves? Or maybe the pomp of a glitzy awards show is something videogames are better off without. After all, what did *It Takes Two* director Josef Fares say about the Oscars? ■ **Nat Clayton**

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Moneycraft

Minecraft modders have earned over \$350M since Microsoft bought Mojang's block-builder.

Arena Legends

Apex Legends' new 3v3 Arena mode is already a fan favourite here.

Long war

After six years, massive *Doom* mod *Wolfenstein: Blade of Agony* is finally available as a standalone game.

Crypto woes

HDDs and SSDs may become as hard to buy as GPUs if a new 'proof-of-space' cryptocurrency takes off.

Out of Steam

This year's GDC survey found only 6% of developers feel Steam's 30% revenue cut is well-earned.

Nuclear winter

Call of Duty: Warzone's nuke event was a huge letdown, because we've seen it do better.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Is there any phrase in the English language that does more work for games journalists than “take this with a pinch of salt”? Maybe “it’s a free bar, right?”, but even then The Spy would argue that, without the pinch of salt defence, the entire enterprise of writing about videogames would come crashing down.

The Spy has to admit that the phrase has its uses – signalling to readers that sometimes even the most credible leaks and rumours can be inaccurate. But with great power comes great responsibility, and too often it’s used as a linguistic shield that lets outlets repeat unconfirmed speculation with impunity. In the wrong hands, the Salt-Pinch Gambit is little more than a wishlist calibrated to the hopes and dreams of the people typing unconfirmed game names into Google. Join The Spy, dear reader, on a tour of the most spurious corners of the internet rumour mill.

(You know, mill, as in the device designed to grind solid materials into smaller pieces, as traditionally used for pepper or – more relevant to the current topic – salt. Get it? It was a pun. God, The Spy doesn’t know why The Spy bothers sometimes.)



THE SPY
The Spy has run out of salt. Do you need anything from the shops?

THERE MIGHT BE BLOOD

It’s dangerous to go alone, take *this* with a pinch of salt! For *Bloodborne* may, or may not be coming to PC.

BLOODBORNE MAY OR MAY NOT BE COMING TO PC

In the ‘may’ camp, the YouTube channel PC Gaming Inquisition cited three anonymous sources claiming that a *Bloodborne* remaster was in the works by Blueprint Games, makers of the *Demon’s Souls* remake. In the ‘may not’ camp is the creator of a *Bloodborne* 60 FPS hack, who says that last year he spoke to developers at a number of studios that at the time were rumoured to be working on a remaster – debunking the claims. The truth? While it must be hard to see through the haze of loose salt dust, The Spy can exclusively confirm that, thanks to the properties of basic metaphysics, *Bloodborne* either will or will not come to PC.

Look upon these handfuls of salt, ye mighty, and despair! For *GTA VI* is once again the topic of speculation. Here, The Spy did some digging and unearthed a shocking fact: a staggering number of people Google search ‘GTA 6’ every day, presumably to check if it accidentally released while they were asleep. In service of this, websites will jump on pretty much any scrap of information purportedly about *GTA VI*’s existence, even if it comes from 4chan. The latest, then, is a fragment of a map that matches a previous fragment of a different section of the map in a previous leak.

Some speculate that the two pictures are clearly of the same blurry mid-2000s phone camera quality lends credence to their legitimacy. The Spy would argue that the same faker could have just taken two different photos of the same image they created and leaked them at different times. Yes, it’s true that *Red Dead Redemption II*’s map did also leak ahead of that game’s announcement, but that is just a historical event and not a predictor of future results, as in accordance with all laws of linear time.

Cry havoc and let slip the fistfuls of sodium chloride! The second you read this, Valve will add *Half-Life 3* to your Steam library for free. Sorry, that was a lie. See how easy it is? Never trust anything you read on the internet.

Or in this case, in a magazine’s self-referential rumour page as written by a character whose inherent untrustworthiness is literally written into their name. Spy out. ■
The Spy

This month in... 2011



1 *Revelations* stands proud as the *Assassin's Creed* game you probably forgot existed. But remember: *Brotherhood* was a pretty big deal, and so its successor felt like a worthy cover star. More importantly, publishers had realised that they could make money on PC if they didn’t saddle games with punitive DRM schemes – a true turning point from the dark days of the late-2000s.

ISSUE
228, July 2011
ON THE COVER
Assassin's Creed: Revelations
IN THE CINEMAS
X-Men: First Class

2 A game you probably do recall: *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*. “One of the most impressive RPGs you’ll ever play,” wrote Richard Cobbett in his 89% review.



3 Also in this issue, we celebrated the absurd storytelling potential of *Dwarf Fortress* by recounting the tale of seven drunks who just happened to look like – and share the name of – PC Gamer’s editorial staff. “Decent furniture also plays a part in a room’s worth, but not in this instance. Tom Francis is a shoddy carpenter. He’ll improve with practice.”



Founded in 2007 in Hamburg, ROCCAT designs the best gaming products in the world. We combine detail-loving German innovation with a genuine passion for what we do. The result is a forward-looking product portfolio adaptable to the gaming trends of tomorrow. Since June 2019 ROCCAT is a Turtle Beach Cooperation Brand.

ROCCAT ELO X STEREO



- 50mm neodymium drivers
- TruSpeak microphone
- ProSpecs Glasses Friendly design

ROCCAT ELO 7.1 USB



- 7.1 surround sound
- TruSpeak microphone
- ProSpecs Glasses Friendly design

ROCCAT ELO 7.1 AIR



- 7.1 surround sound
- 24 hour battery life
- Superhuman® Hearing

ROCCAT VULCAN TKL



- ROCCAT® Titan Switch Mechanical
- Tenkeyless form factor
- Detachable USB-C cable

ROCCAT VULCAN 120 AIMO



- ROCCAT® Titan Switch Mechanical
- Detachable palm rest
- Robust build quality

ROCCAT BURST CORE



- ROCCAT® Titan Switch Optical
- 8,500dpi optical sensor
- 68 grams extreme lightweight

ROCCAT BURST PRO



- ROCCAT® Titan Switch Optical
- Heat-treated 100% pure PTFE glides
- ROCCAT® PhantomFlex cable

Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

QA testers Rachel (Ashly Burch) and Dana (Imani Hakim) have each other's backs.

SEASON PASS

MYTHIC QUEST keeps facing real gaming industry issues with a smile

Mythic Quest is a workplace sitcom about the dev team behind the most popular (fictional) MMORPG in the world. We talked to some of the actors and creators behind the show (which is co-produced by Ubisoft Film & Television) about the serious game industry issues it tackles with humour, how gamers and developers have responded to the show, and if there are any similarities between making a game and making a show about a game.

In Mythic Quest's pilot episode, the team was scrambling to complete its first expansion, called *Raven's Banquet*, and season two similarly begins with the gang hard at work on the next expansion: *Titan's Rift*. And in some ways, it sounds like making the second season of a television show might not be all that different from releasing a new expansion for a popular game. Viewers, like players, want something new and surprising, but there's some danger in straying too far from the formula fans have come to expect.

"What we've heard from our partners at Ubisoft is that gamers hate when you change anything about the game, but they also hate when you leave it the same," says Mythic Quest co-creator, executive producer and writer Megan Ganz. We're a fickle bunch.

And that can be true of TV, too, says Ganz, a veteran of long-running shows like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *Community*. "You're riding that line where it feels new and exciting, but it also still feels like the game that they all fell in love with."

At the same time, a new season (and perhaps a game expansion) provides a bit more room for creativity. "The nice thing about a second season of a TV show is that you've done all your work in the first season, your heavy lifting of setting up the characters and the situations, and making people fall in love with these characters," says Ganz. "And in the second season you just get to have fun."

ZOOM OR BUST

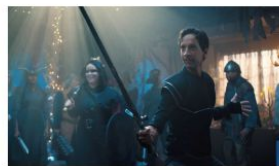
Game development isn't just used as a backdrop in Mythic Quest. In just the second episode it was already smartly taking on some very real issues in the gaming industry, such as when the dev team discovered that white supremacists absolutely loved playing *Mythic Quest*.

Another episode touched on how developers are forced to crunch to meet unrealistic deadlines. A special filmed and released during the COVID-19 pandemic effectively showed not just the struggles of working from home (such as trying to teach octogenarian writer CW Longbottom how to use a webcam) but the very real issues of isolation and uncertainty.



Real quest

To create footage of the *Mythic Quest* game, Ubisoft brought in developers from one of its studios, Red Storm Entertainment, to essentially build a real game. The studio, which has worked on series like *Far Cry* and *Rainbow Six*, built original assets and a working gameplay sandbox that could be filmed as actors played the fake (but real) game.



FAR LEFT: Teamwork (eventually) makes the dream work.

LEFT: Jo (Jessie Ennis) and Brad (Danny Pudi) take up arms.



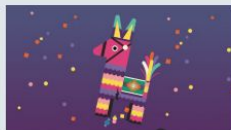
INSIDE GAMING *What have the cast of Mythic Quest been playing during the lockdown?*



DANNY PUDI (BRAD)
BREATH OF THE WILD
"My son is making fun of me at this point. You still haven't finished this game?"



CHARLOTTE NICDAO (POPPY)
ANIMAL CROSSING
"It was actually one of the ways that I would hang out with my mom, who was back in Australia."



JESSIE ENNIS (JO)
TETRIS, TWO DOTS
"I recently was caught by my screentime app and found out how many hours I spend playing."



DAVID HORNSBY (DAVID)
FIFA
"I've gotten into FIFA 21. I'm playing weekend league now. I've got a club team with some high school friends."

And several episodes have addressed how difficult it can be for women and people of colour in the typically white male dominated industry.

Ashly Burch, who gamers already know from her dozens of roles in games like the *Borderlands* series and *Life is Strange*, plays QA tester Rachel on *Mythic Quest*, and also writes for the show. Her years of experience in the gaming industry went a long way toward informing the scripts and broaching these very real topics.

"Especially at the beginning of season one when I came in as a writer, that was a huge part of what I tried to bring to the writer's room, that perspective on the gaming industry and gaming culture," says Burch.

"And everyone on the show was really dedicated to trying to make *Mythic Quest* both a love letter to games but also accurate," Burch continues. "We didn't want to gloss over the fact that it's hard to be a woman in the games industry, or that it's hard to be a person of colour in the games industry sometimes."

Actor Imani Hakim, who plays Dana, another of *Mythic Quest*'s QA testers, agrees. "The good thing is, this is a comedy so we're able to tackle these subjects and make them funny and find the humour within all of that," Hakim told us. "And it wouldn't be fair to make a show about gaming without talking about those adversities that women face in the gaming industry, and people of colour, we do talk about it. We don't push it in your face, but it's something that we're able to tell within the story, with

humour. You will definitely see more of that [in season two]. It's authentic to the story."

Burch adds that another group was happy to see themselves reflected in the show: QA testers, whose dedication often goes unsung. "I've definitely had people on my Twitter feed say, thank you, I'm a QA tester, and we definitely feel like we're at the bottom of the totem pole, and it was really nice to see us represented in the show!"

And gamers give their feedback, too. Let's face it, if you make a sitcom about a paper company, you're probably not going to hear from tens of thousands of paper company employees. But if you make a show about games, you're definitely going to hear from gamers.

"I think we were really cognisant of that from the very beginning," says Charlotte Nicdao, who plays Poppy Li, co-creative director of the game. "And I know that during the development of the show one of the things that the writers and producers really wanted to do was create a show that was not making fun of gamer culture. The feedback that I've gotten is that the community sees that and it's all been really positive," she says. "And it's also been very cool to see all these actual game developers on Twitter talking about how a lot of this is very, very accurate to what their jobs are."

"It's fun to get to feel like we've been able to connect with that community. That was always something that we wanted to do."

Christopher Livingston

"WE DIDN'T WANT TO GLOSS OVER THE FACT THAT IT'S HARD TO BE A WOMAN IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY"

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

BOY RACER

How a childhood movie memory brought **DRIVER** into being

If you're still seething over *Driver*'s infamous car park level, you might well blame series creator Martin Edmondson. But the real culprit is the film that planted the idea in his head some two decades earlier. *The Driver* (1978) was a crime chase thriller in which a wheelman proved himself by flinging an orange Mercedes between the pillars of an underground garage. It's all there: the handbrake turns, the speed test, the reverse 180 – even the slalom that would-be drivers found so tricky to master.

"It was actually the first film I ever went to the cinema to see," Edmondson explains. "My dad had to go first just to check it wasn't too violent."

The level's difficulty, however, is all thanks to Edmondson. "I could do that garage in just under 25 seconds," he says. "So to me, giving you 60 seconds was plenty of time. Well, it wasn't. If I went back and played it now I probably couldn't do it."

Those who did manage to get past the garage opener were treated to more '70s car-noir. Like *The Driver*'s protagonist, your player character seldom spoke, and only ever saw the four walls of his motel room after hours. Tanner lived the empty life of the criminal professional, as exemplified by Robert De Niro in *Heat* (it's no coincidence that Michael Mann initially offered *Heat*'s script to *The Driver*'s writer-director, Walter Hill). *Driver* belongs to the same lineage – or would do, if not for interference from the game's original publisher, Sony.

"You were going to be a getaway driver, not an undercover cop," Edmondson says. "Fortunately or unfortunately, they were not keen on him being a bad guy. They'd rather have him somebody you aspire to be."

The *Driver*'s most important gift to Edmondson, though, was its American muscle cars – the overpowered and understeering hunks of metal that stuntmen sent sliding across four lanes, and which came to define *Driver*. "For the TV ad we used one of the drivers for *The Dukes of Hazzard*," Edmondson says. "They would lock off the diff just to make it more slippery."

This nerdy appreciation for filmcraft resulted not only in *Driver*'s director feature, but in *Stuntman* (2002), which delighted in revealing the secrets of cinema – like the logs beneath stunt cars that would fire downwards at just the right moment, creating the force for a roll.

NAY-STATION

Stuntman never appeared on PC, though, and nor did *Driver 2*. "Back then you had to specifically program for so many different graphics cards, and sound cards were an issue," Edmondson sighs. "It was always a hassle. There were definite advantages in those days to developing a game for one platform, so that was PlayStation. But also, racing games were not that popular at the time on PC."

There was a third factor, too, though Edmondson wasn't necessarily aware of it himself: personal preference. "You tend to subconsciously favour the system that you play yourself," he says. "I wasn't a massive PC gamer back then. You don't make proper business decisions based on that, but it is an influence."

The series got the perfect send-off on PC, however, with the excellent *Driver: San Francisco*, for which Edmondson worked with Ubisoft. "They were a good match," he says. "They're not afraid of taking a few risks." The game recast players as Tanner, after an accident that left him in a coma – floating around the titular city in his own head and flying freely between vehicles.

"It was a very off-the-wall concept, and there were a lot of sarcastic comments around that until people played it and understood what it actually was," Edmondson says. "It was a tough one to sell, and you've got to admire Ubisoft for pressing on with something like that."

The publisher gave Edmondson's team half a decade to get *Driver: San Francisco* right – and to get it running at 60 fps, which accounted for a year and a half in itself. Perhaps best of all, Ubisoft's playtesting process gave Edmondson a new perspective on difficulty.

"If I'd tried to do the garage test with Ubisoft, they'd have said 'No, don't be silly,'" he says. "Looking back on it, that was a silly decision. I suppose that's an example of mellowing. As you get older, you get less hardcore." ■

Jeremy Peel

GET AWAY

The problem with today's film car chases

"You've no idea how much of it is skill and how much is CG effects."

"Chop chop, cut cut – the way they edit, you don't get any chance for it to settle."

"They introduce shake into the camera, I just can't even follow it."





**“I COULD DO THAT
GARAGE IN JUST UNDER
25 SECONDS”**



TOP: Tanner and his partner, Jones, stuck around until 2011.

ABOVE: The infamous garage, which some players never left.



DNA Tracing

 GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

**IT WAS A BREAKTHROUGH
IN 3D CITY EXPLORATION,
AND REFLECTIONS WAS
THE FIRST**

CHASING THE HARE

How Reflections got over *GTA* and embraced its own identity

Reflections found itself when it turned its back on the track. During the '90s, most driving games were straightforward circuit racers, and the Newcastle studio's *Destruction Derby* series appeared no different – sending stock cars around figure-of-eight loops ad infinitum. Only when an inevitable pile-up happened did Reflections' speciality emerge: realistic physics and crunchy collisions.

Those traits were finally set free by *Driver* in 1999 – another driving game, but crucially, not a racing game. Studio founder Martin Edmondson embraced his first love of car chases, setting getaway missions against the urban grids of Miami, San Francisco, LA and New York (as well as a chunk of Newcastle upon Tyne's city centre, as a secret unlock). Reflections infused these streets with the same world-class physics play as simulators like *Gran Turismo*, but with a different goal in mind – capturing the sway of the 1968 Ford Mustang in Bullitt as Steve McQueen executed a right-angle handbrake turn. This was no longer sport but cinema, a stylish and dangerous dive into a criminal underworld.

It was a breakthrough in 3D city exploration, and Reflections was the first. But up in Edinburgh, another developer influenced by a similar set of films was catching up. By the time *Driver* came back to the PC, Rockstar North had put out *GTA III* and *Vice City*, yoining the soft suspension and mission formats Reflections had pioneered and taking the formula three steps further. One of *GTA III*'s missions even tasked you with bumping off a yakuza wheelman named Tanner, after *Driver*'s protagonist – a taunt Reflections seemed unable to resist in the years that followed.

STEPPING OUT

Driver 3 remains notorious, the *Cyberpunk 2077* of its day in terms of the gulf between public promise and unrealised ambition. Played today, it proves a surprisingly robust car game – its lively driving model clearly built by

the same experienced team that threw muscle cars around Miami in 1999. Some of the missions are series standouts, too, like the race to pick up three stolen cars and pile them onto a moving truck before it reaches its destination – less an A to B journey than the full alphabet.

The cities themselves, meanwhile, are satisfying to navigate – particularly the undulating veins that connect the beach vistas of Nice, and the tight, challenging Gecekondru shanty towns of Istanbul. There's nothing quite like hearing the call to prayer echoing off the mosques midway through a combined car, boat and bike chase – a veritable vehicular triathlon.

But critics were right to condemn *Driver 3*'s on-foot sections, which were shockingly underdeveloped. The shooting, which resembled *Max Payne*-lite, was everything Reflections' driving had never been – weightless, awkward, and devoid of satisfying feedback.

"In *Driver 2* [on PlayStation] you could get out of the car," Martin Edmondson points out. "People forget that it came out before *Grand Theft Auto [III]*, so it was just a natural progression. We'd done 50 missions locked in the car. But the problem with *Driver 3* is that we took on far too much work, and in areas that we just didn't have a massive amount of experience in."

Reflections' owner, Atari, set an immovable deadline for the game, and so it came out unfinished. Sales were strong, which must have helped a publisher in severe financial straits – but the reputational damage permanently relegated *Driver* from the biggest leagues of

FAR RIGHT: *Driver 3*. Not Reflections' finest hour.



BRAND RECOGNITION

Driver 3's top three product placements



NOKIA

With a handgun and a polyphonic ringtone, you can rule the world.



ENERGY DRINK

Beer or energy drink? Whatever: it goes well with some bourbon.

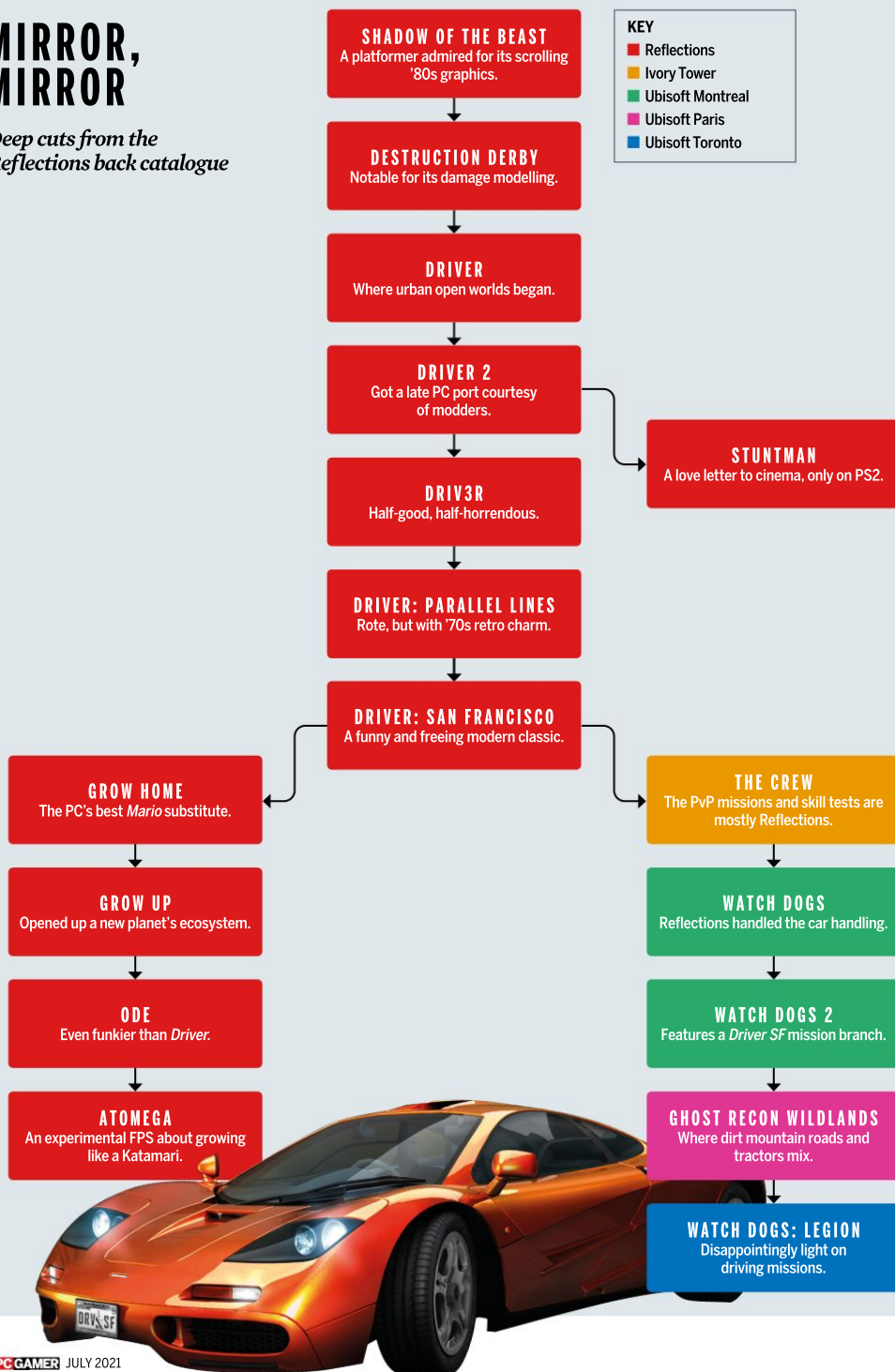


NVIDIA

Historians say this is why Nvidia won the GPU war. Are they correct?

MIRROR, MIRROR

Deep cuts from the Reflections back catalogue



✖ driving action. It's perhaps unsurprising that Edmondson, unhappy with Atari's decision-making, left the company soon afterwards. The next *Driver* game, *Parallel Lines*, settled into second place behind *GTA* – aping its open-world structure and lock-on weapon targeting. Finally, *Reflections* had mastered on-foot combat that was perfectly inoffensive – but players had moved on, and it was tough to make the case for why they should care.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Enter Ubisoft. The publishing behemoth bought up *Reflections* in 2006, and one of its first acts was to invite Edmondson back as game director for a reboot of *Driver*. Named *Driver: San Francisco*, it returned the series to its classic setting. And through a high-concept conceit, it stripped away the pedestrian plodding that had held the studio back for a decade, allowing players to instantly shift between any car in the city at will. The entire game took place in the protagonist's head, and felt like a driving reverie. The drifts were wider than ever, every citizen hopped out of your path just in the nick of time, and the lampposts popped out of the ground on contact with a bumper, no impediment to your fantasy fun.

Despite stellar reviews, *Driver: San Francisco* didn't reach the sales heights of *Reflections*' early years. But its lesson – that the studio should embrace its core skill set and leave the shooting to others – was heeded. *Reflections* became Ubisoft's in-house driving expert, applying the handling tools built for *Driver* to the likes of *Watch Dogs* and *Ghost Recon Wildlands* – projects on which the lead developers had little experience with vehicles. It backed up Ivory Tower on *The Crew*, lending its experience as the planet's most seasoned open-world driving team to a condensed-but-huge version of the entire US.

GROWING UP

That would have been a poetic ending to the story of *Reflections*. But the studio's work to help out its parent



corp ultimately thrust it back into the spotlight. *Reflections* had attempted to make a procedural animation tool for use in early character prototyping across all of Ubisoft's studios – but the results looked so daft, they birthed a new character instead: BUD.

A tiny red robot, BUD could stumble around and grab onto objects. His bumbling charm led a team within *Reflections* to build a beanstalk climbing game around him, which became *Grow Home*. There are no wheels on BUD, and he

doesn't screech when turning corners so much as chirrup like a happy modem. But his existence is testament to the joy of movement – and what's more *Driver* than that? ■

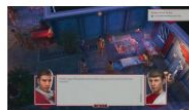
Jeremy Peel

ABOVE: The original *Driver* sounded best on PC, thanks to a funky CD soundtrack.

BELOW: The shooting sequences in *Driver: Parallel Lines* are mercifully rare. Phew!







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021DEVELOPER
Logic ArtistsPUBLISHER
THQ NordicLINK
bit.ly/2Q30IWGEXPEDITIONS:
ROMESwords, sandals, and a serious
RPG under the toga

The *Expeditions* series has invaded Mesoamerica with the Conquistadors and raided England with the Vikings, taking the idea of a historical RPG from a niche concept to a fan favourite. Now *Expeditions* is going to ancient Rome, and it's asking players to become one of the greatest conquerors of the age.

Expeditions: Rome is the latest in the series, coming this year. It's a sprawling work of historical fiction set in a world where the player's custom character walks in the footsteps of Julius Caesar. Like previous games in the series, *Rome* won't focus on a precise retelling of the history, but rather use history as a jumping-off point. It's also going to take advantage of the new setting to shake up the underlying RPG mechanics, making the tactical battles more exciting and faster-paced than they were before.

"We never want to constrain ourselves to writing about specific events in history, but rather think about how to stay true to historical figures, periods and details such as how people dress, how they're armed, their religion, their view on other cultures, and so on," says Jonas Wæver, creative director at Logic Artists. Wæver has a passion for history – his father was a history teacher, and gave him "quite the stack of books" as mandatory reading about Rome. The studio's spin on Roman history shows in what I saw of the game, including some social encounters and combats spread across three regions of the ancient world: Asia Minor (part of Turkey these days), Egypt, and Gaul (now known as France).

"Historical events can be a jumping-off point for us when we insert the player into a particular part of history, but once the player character enters the world stage, all bets are off," says Wæver. "After all, this is

a roleplaying game and one of the most important things for us is that the player should be free to choose, and can act in completely ahistorical ways."

HISTORY BOYS

Thus, you'll be your own Caesar: you'll meet major historical figures, but you'll form your own relationships, rivalries, or alliances with them. Customising your character in true RPG fashion means choosing a class and skills, but also a gender. Female and male characters have slightly different subplots to contend with, as the deeply-rooted sexism of patriarchal Roman culture will stand against women who seek power in Rome. "We wanted it to be a story of triumph and overcoming that adversity, so some artistic licence was needed," says Wæver.

And it sounds like there's a lot of triumph to be had, given that the game has seven endings and a "huge amount of further permutations based on the outcomes of side quests". Each of the five companion characters has their own set of outcomes in the end, as well, depending on how they approved of your choices.

Your character will be one of a handful of classes, each with three subclasses. These are Roman roles, each with access to a different set of weapons that give them their basic abilities. Thus you get classes like the shield-and-sword-wielding Princeps, a heavy infantry soldier who can be built as a shield-based tank, a crowd-controlling brawler, or an ally-supporting buffer. Other classes include the support-focused Triarius, a second-line veteran; the skirmishing Vele, a dart-throwing light infantry; and the Sagittarius, a consummate archer. Unlike in previous games, characters get their attack actions from the weapon they have equipped – there's no basic attack to be seen. Wæver says the team was "really pleased" with eliminating the basic attack action from combat, because just swapping weapons opens up new options for the characters.

FIRST
LOOKCHARACTERS GET THEIR
ATTACK ACTIONS FROM THE
WEAPON THEY HAVE EQUIPPED

Expeditions: Rome



“Now you get multiple different attack skills from the weapons you’ve equipped, and they’re never just an attack – they always have some extra effects such as applying a status effect or dealing extra damage under specific circumstances, which raises the skill ceiling and rewards you for playing smarter,” he says. It’s all part of an increased emphasis on the mechanical design of the fighting in *Expeditions: Rome*.

“We have a much more significant power curve in *Rome* than we’ve had in previous instalments,” says Wæver. “Health, damage, shield strength, armour, resistances, and skill complexity all ramp up gradually throughout the game.” Those will be improvements from the style of game featured in previous *Expeditions* RPGs, and they’re not the only ones. Wæver was clear that *Rome*’s three act structure provides more than just a plot. “Unlike in *Expeditions: Viking*,” he says, “we’re not dropping you into the deep end during character creation this time – skill choices are unlocked very gradually.”

WORLD TOUR

The game starts during the wars between Rome and the Kingdom of Pontus, in what is now Turkey, then known as Asia Minor or Anatolia. The king Mithridates Megas has gathered Hellenic peoples, Greeks and Greek colonists, to go to war against Rome. The character is a young Legatus, a high-ranking military officer, and must fight both personal battles and make military campaign decisions in order to further their career as a Roman head of family and politician. Fighting Mithridates is the first step. “Then the story moves to Africa where we get to interact with the Berbers and the Egyptians,” says Wæver, “and finally we head to Gaul to meet some of the myriad tribes of what is now France, Switzerland and Belgium.”

Between acts the character goes back to Rome and checks in with their family, sees the benefits or takes the fallout from their actions in the field, and tries to advance themselves politically before they are sent back into the field. “That’s really where the political aspects of the story unfold, and also where the consequences of all the decisions and all the actions you

take during each of the wars really come back to haunt you,” says Wæver.

One example was a smuggler working for the player’s political rival. On finding the smuggler in the field supplying the enemy army, the player had to choose between getting the smugglers’ boat before it escaped or going after the shipment of weapons and supplies that would make their next battle more difficult and get their soldiers killed.

And getting killed is a real danger. In tactical battles your party is generally outnumbered by the enemy, making a clever approach and smart positioning key. “Our goal has been to make combat feel fast and deadly,” says Wæver. “Though you will sometimes run into very tough enemies, by and large the increased challenge comes from having to fight more and more enemies. We really want the player to live that fantasy of being a heavily armoured Roman soldier holding the line against a horde that vastly outnumbers you and your men.”

To that end, Logic Artists has focused the new combat system on large combat arenas and mobile encounters. Moving quickly to avoid fighting unnecessary enemies and positioning yourself in striking distance will be a key tactic.

ORDER UP

More than anything Wæver and his team focused hard on speed. “One huge improvement we’ve made is to allow simultaneous execution of orders,” he says. “This means you can tell one of your characters to move up and attack, switch to another character, and then tell them to do something else while the first character is still moving or swinging. This also means that interrupts such as attacks of opportunity no longer pause execution, they can just happen fluidly as part of another character’s action. The AI can move multiple characters at the same time as well, which reduces the amount of time you spend waiting for the enemies to finish their turn.”

This is the third *Expeditions* game, and it’s been four years since the last one. *Viking* was well-received, but *Rome* is far more ambitious, aggressively moving the series’ design forward. The narrative writing, characters, and combat that Logic Artists showed off in the preview were all more advanced and compelling than anything in its prior games. We’ll find out if they can pull it off when *Expeditions: Rome* releases this year.

Jon Bolding

IN TACTICAL BATTLES YOUR PARTY IS GENERALLY OUTNUMBERED BY THE ENEMY

Every weapon class has its own attacks. In purple are the spear's.

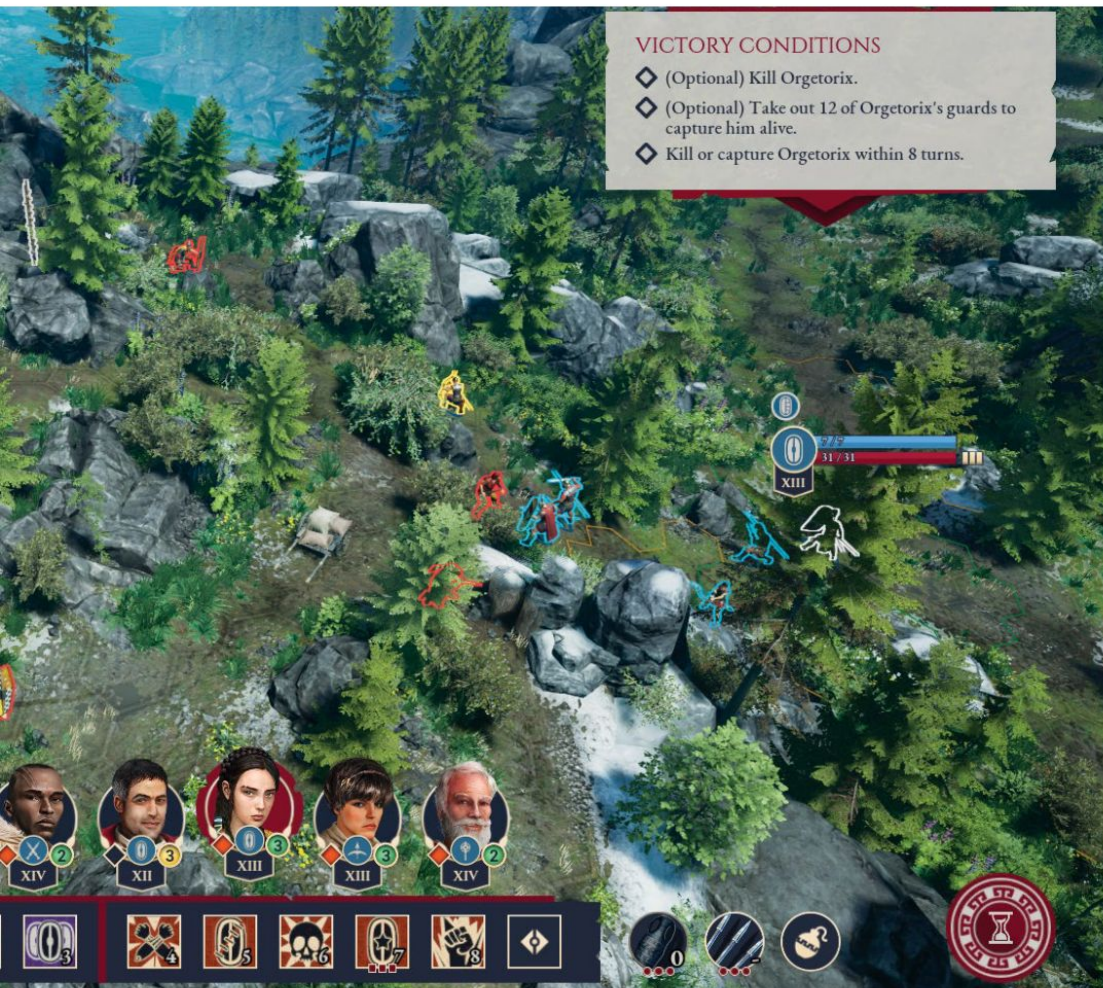


The dusty environs of North Africa are lush, in their own way.



VICTORY CONDITIONS

- ◆ (Optional) Kill Orgetorix.
- ◆ (Optional) Take out 12 of Orgetorix's guards to capture him alive.
- ◆ Kill or capture Orgetorix within 8 turns.



Diablo II: Resurrected

Zoomed in, it barely looks like the same game.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
diabloii.blizzard.com

DIABLO II: RESURRECTED

The satanic lord of action RPGs returns

While *Diablo II: Resurrected* overhauls *Diablo II*'s graphics, underneath the new 3D models, dynamic lighting and shiny puddles it's the same action RPG I was click-click-clicking through 21 years ago. It feels a bit simplistic today (the skill tree is tiny!), but that only makes me like it more. *Diablo II* still rules.

There are little tells that *Diablo II: Resurrected* is just a costume – the way the character model gently snaps to the eight directions the original sprite can face, for example – but I might not have believed that it's truly just a high-res version of *Diablo II* if it weren't possible to unmask. Press G, and the 4K world dissolves into the original low-res renders. It's extremely cool.

Aside from the redone graphics, not much has changed. There are quality of life and accessibility improvements, such as an automatic gold pickup option and colour-blind modes. The online functionality is being updated. Otherwise, this is a purely visual remaster.

I'm split on whether or not the new graphics are an improvement. Where torches and campfires in the original seem to emit pale white moonlight, you get the expected warm glow from the new dynamic lighting, which I like, but it does make Sanctuary feel less otherworldly – perhaps something is lost there. And some of the new art lacks the character of the original pixelated renders: boulders that used to look like smooth ass cheeks now look like normal rocks, and once

PLAYED IT

charmingly chunky wagons are now more sensibly proportioned and covered with knick-knacks and details. Characters whose features were mostly implied are now sharply defined. A few pale pixels and a helmet of comic book red hair have been replaced with severe cheekbones and a styled auburn 'do. Some intrigue is lost.

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

There are places where I like *Resurrected*'s new art more, though. The first dungeon looks creepier in the new version. The Gargantuan Beasts, big yeti-like guys, are fabulous-looking. It's the same deal as with the human characters: they've been given detailed, shiny fur, as if someone's done a realistic render of a cartoon character, but instead of making them less intriguing the uncanny translation makes them weirder and cooler.

Playing it, I was surprised by how old *Diablo II* feels. It doesn't have a hotbar for attacks, for instance. At any given moment, you can have one action assigned to your left mouse button and one action assigned to your right mouse button. If you want to use more than two attacks or spells during a fight, you can assign keys (the top row function keys, by default) that change your mouse button bindings on the fly, or use the scroll wheel to cycle your right mouse button binding. The number keys are used for potions.

You get used to it. And as I played, I was reminded of how many little things *Diablo II* did so brilliantly. The sound effects remain top tier: the ping when you move a gem in your inventory, the gurgle when you drop a potion, the clink of falling gold. The menus are just about perfect, and it's nice to play a game that fits what you need to know into a few half-screens. *Diablo II* conformed snugly to the platform's limitations at the time, and that's an approach you don't see too much today, when limitations are things to overcome by adding more sub-menus.

Those new to *Diablo II* may find it too simple compared to the games it inspired – *Destiny II*, *Path of Exile* and so many others – but I can't wait to enjoy the simple fun of clicking on demons and finding magic swords. Hopefully the multiplayer support works well.

Tyler Wilde



The underground is creepier with the new art.



I'M SPLIT ON WHETHER OR NOT THE NEW GRAPHICS ARE AN IMPROVEMENT



Last Stop

Stealing a policeman's helmet was a bad idea in 1982. Definitely don't try it in 2021.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
JulyDEVELOPER
Variable StatePUBLISHER
Annapurna InteractiveLINK
bit.ly/3xutpaE

LAST STOP

London calling, with sex cults and bickering teenagers

Anyone who's read *Rivers of London* will feel right at home with the intro to *Last Stop*. Having hilariously stolen a policeman's helmet, two teens from 1982 try to escape into the London Underground, pursued by plod, where they find a mysterious green-glowing door and an even more mysterious stranger. One steps through, the other holds back.

An adventure from the creators of 2016's *Virginia*, *Last Stop* makes use of a similar flat-shaded Unity-powered aesthetic. While major characters are detailed, background figures have a distressing lack of facial features. Player characters stand stiffly when not controlled, and bump into things a lot when they are. Two characters wear the same shoes, but don't seem to notice. It's not all bad though.

Last Stop is split into three narratives, selected by choosing a figure sitting on a Tube seat. John Smith is a single dad with a young daughter, Molly, a dull office job, and an overbearing supervisor. He keeps a vacuum in his bedroom and gets letters from social services. He spends much of his opening chapter tired and despairing at the world. As you'd guess from his name, he's an everyman character we're meant to sympathise with. There are hints of tragedy in his past, but he lives for Molly, their relationship strong and loving. So guess what gets whipped away from him?

Meena is a different proposition entirely. Hard and career-minded, her world is a much greyer one, though

everyone there has really cool computers with eight screens. Characters' dialogue responses are split across three keys (or controller buttons) and generally get harsher as you move from left to right. Meena starts off harsh, and largely gets worse. She makes a minigame out of sizing up a co-worker and deciding they are of no use to her, then goes home via her lover's house to lie to her father, husband, and son.

Set in present-day London, albeit one with a 5th Street and 9th Avenue (at least the plug sockets have the requisite number of pins), *Last Stop* shows many sides of the city. From terraced townhouses to high-rise flats, the Oyster card scanner at the Underground station, lifts that don't work, impersonal glass office blocks, conveniently placed taxis, adverts for chips, and enormously expensive contracts for flip phones, a lot of work has gone into making the city experienced by the three different characters a distinct one.

THIRD RAIL

The third member of the tritagonist is

Donna Adeleke, a teenager whose name gives up little of her character (her surname is of Yoruba origin, meaning something like 'royalty triumphed'). She is part of a

conspiracy-believing trio who discover the leader of an urban guerrilla army, or possibly a weird sex cult. Tracking him through the city, things get out of control and the poor man ends up stripped to his underpants and tied to a chair.

The opening chapters of the characters give little away about the supernatural elements of the story, though I'd be surprised if even Donna ran into a talking fox. The mysterious stranger from the intro makes further appearances, having not aged in 39 years, and gives a demonstration of his powers by ruining John's life in a very freaky way.

And while the textures may be flat, the signposting weak (it's too easy to wander around a screen looking for the exit), the shadows jagged, and those blank faces disturbing, this is a character-driven piece that focuses on secret lives and the magic of the mundane as much as the more overt occult happenings. So far, I like it.

Ian Evenden



John and Molly's walk to school lets you listen to them chat.

THE POOR MAN ENDS UP STRIPPED TO HIS UNDERPANTS AND TIED TO A CHAIR

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022DEVELOPER
Covenant.devPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
gord.game

GORD

Make sure your village doesn't get eaten by spiders

You know all those little villages in *The Witcher* games, full of grubby-faced peasants beset on all sides by dreadful monsters? Well, how would you like to be the mayor of one? That's *Gord*'s elevator pitch.

FIRST LOOK

Combining elements of survival horror with a city-building management sim, it charges you with keeping your people alive in a dark fantasy world inspired by Slavic folklore. They'll be beset by disgusting trolls, huge spider queens, and worse. Basically everything's out to eat them, and it's up to you to make sure that doesn't happen.

There's a lot of ambition here. An AI-driven quest system procedurally generates side activities and events to keep you on your toes as you pursue the main story. There's a full magic system that allows you to beseech the gods for aid. And villagers suffer lasting psychological effects, like the heroes in *Darkest Dungeon*.

Can Covenant.dev pull all that off with its debut release? I'm excited to find out.

Robin Valentine



techradar.



The home of technology

techradar.com

PREVIEW

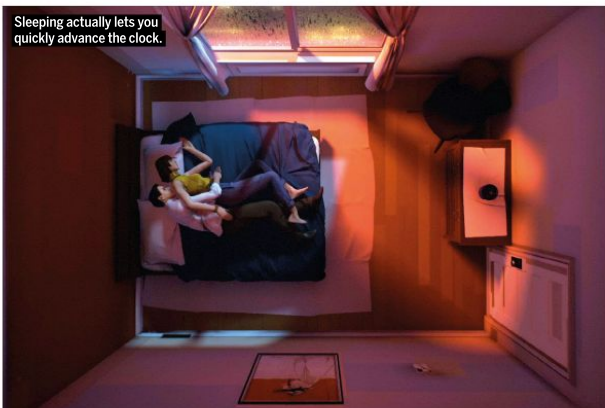
Twelve Minutes

Resisting is a good way to
get your neck massaged.



It's a small apartment, but
damn, that golden hour glow.

Sleeping actually lets you
quickly advance the clock.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021DEVELOPER
Luis AntonioPUBLISHER
Annapurna InteractiveLINK
twelveminutesgame.com

TWELVE MINUTES

Solve a time loop mystery without leaving your flat

Willem Dafoe's face as the Green Goblin in Spider-Man still haunts me. I've been scared of Dafoe for going on 20 years, and *Twelve Minutes* is proof that that fear remains strong even when I can't see his ghoulish grin. Here at least I have good reason: he only went and choked me to death.

That was the first time the aggressive cop, voiced by Dafoe, broke into my apartment and accused my wife of being a killer. It wouldn't be the last. *Twelve Minutes* is a time loop game, a miniature Groundhog Day mystery that hinges on this break-in and the buried story behind it. Before I played *Twelve Minutes*, I didn't expect my character to be aware of the time loop – I assumed this was a small game about trying to figure out all the possible ways this encounter could go, tugging on threads until you find the one that unravels the whole thing. But after Dafoe choked my character to death and I jumped back in time, I suddenly had new dialogue options with my wife – *honey, you're not going to believe this...*

According to creator Luis Antonio, you'll actually spend something like eight to ten hours to get through the game with new dialogue and interactions opening up as you do more loops. Your apartment is tiny, but it's surprising how many things you can do and how many variables can affect the outcome. On my second try, while my wife sat on the couch reading, oblivious to the cop who'd soon barge in, I grabbed a knife and hid in the closet,

hoping to jump out and surprise him. I did jump out knife in hand, but Dafoe punched me and ended that loop.

Next I rooted around the apartment more, discovering some sleeping pills in the bathroom. Maybe I could give them to my wife and hide her in the bedroom so I could talk to the cop before he flew off the handle? While she sat on the couch I put the pills in a glass of water and filled it up in the kitchen sink. Antonio hinted that she probably wasn't going to take the glass after I drugged it right in front of her. But next time, if I tried mixing it in the bathroom first...

AGAINST THE CLOCK

Antonio's background is in art, so it's no surprise that *Twelve Minutes* looks lovely, softly lit and uncannily realistic in a way that reminds me of the stop motion film *Anomalisa*. The perspective is locked to a top-down camera that made me feel like a puppeteer, which was exaggerated by occasionally stiff and awkward animation. My character and his wife would sometimes bumble into each other as I walked around the room or robotically switch between animations. Those hiccups can disrupt the intimacy the game is going for – and it wants this to feel intensely personal.

In your first few minutes you're sitting down for dessert by candlelight, talking like a couple who've had years to get comfortable with one another. You find out your wife is pregnant. The angle makes slipping into their conversations almost voyeuristic, and the dialogue and performances are really effective – they remind me of the natural dialogue in indie great *Oxenfree*. I hope *Twelve Minutes*' last few months of development will iron out some of those goofy animations in what's otherwise a striking game.

Either way, the mystery is the big draw here. Most games are time loops, letting you play levels over and over. But I've never played one that handles its story like *Twelve Minutes*, letting my character's knowledge open up new possibilities in a tiny space full of puzzle pieces. I have a feeling that the final assembled puzzle will look a lot different than what I think I'm putting together at the start, and I'm really looking forward to finding out what that is.

Wes Fenlon



Recognise the carpet?

I DID JUMP OUT KNIFE IN HAND, BUT DAFOE PUNCHED ME AND ENDED THAT LOOP

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous



Demons come spilling out of an abyss called the Worldwound.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer

DEVELOPER
Owlcat Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
wrath.owlcatgames.com

PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

A fantasy RPG split
between two worlds

Back in 2018, Owlcat Games released *Pathfinder: Kingmaker*, a CRPG based on the popular tabletop game. It had some neat ideas, like building and managing your own kingdom, but paled in comparison to the likes of *Divinity* and *Pillars of Eternity*.

Fast forward to today and the developer is hoping to make up for the first game's shortcomings – and has managed to raise over \$2 million through crowdfunding to help them do it. *Wrath of the Righteous* expands on *Kingmaker* in every way, including the addition of Mythic Paths. These let you become, among other fantastic creatures, a Lich, Angel, Gold Dragon, or Demon, which will dramatically affect your character, how the story plays out, and how the world reacts to them.

But that all comes much later. First, you have to decide who you want to be. This is one of the deepest character creation systems I've seen in an RPG, with an overwhelming number of ways to shape your protagonist. If you're the kind of person who spends an hour creating your hero in games like *Baldur's Gate*, pour yourself a hot drink for this one. To kick things off, I choose the Cavalier class, who specialises in mounted combat – a new feature in *Wrath of the Righteous*.

BEAST MODE

I also choose the Beast Master subclass: a type of Cavalier who "spends his life in constant pursuit of the most perfect mount, forming bonds with greater, more powerful, and more exotic creatures". Beast Masters get class bonuses to Persuasion, Athletics, and Mobility, but they can't cast any spells. Because you needs spells when you're a *master of*

beasts, right? Other classes available in the game include Barbarians, Hunters, and Bloodragers – a type of fearsome front-line fighter with a very metal name.

Then it's time to create my character's background. I decide he's a Wanderer. "Life is a path, not a destination," the in-game description reads "Your backpack is always ready and your feet are itching for the road, wherever it may lead." I like playing as drifters and loners in RPGs. Leaning into that, I also make him a Nomad – a kind of subclass – which gives me specialist knowledge of nature lore and my animal buddy a +3 hit point bonus. It also makes me proficient with scimitars, which is cool. Who doesn't love a scimitar?

Next up, stats. I select Charisma as my racial bonus, because I love sweet talkin' my way out of trouble in CRPGs. I give my Cavalier a lot of Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma, but skip on the Wisdom and Intelligence. Being a Nomad, I figure he probably hasn't spent much time hanging out in the library with dusty old wizards. For Feats, I add Alertness, which gives me a +2 bonus to Perception, and Endurance, which earns me a +2 bonus to Athletics – and lets me sleep in light or medium armour without becoming fatigued.

To finish things off I choose Atheism as my religion (or lack thereof), True Neutral as my alignment, and best of all, a *velociraptor* as my animal companion. Yes, there are dinosaurs in *Wrath of the Righteous* – some of which you can use as mounts and ride into battle. Why gallop around on a boring old horse when you can charge gloriously into the fray on the back of a prehistoric beast? Other mounts and animal companions include dogs, elk, mastodons, wolves, and smilodons – a prehistoric beast you probably know better as a sabre-toothed tiger.

With my character complete, I begin my adventure in Kenabres "a city poised on the border between two worlds". The setting in *Wrath of the Righteous* is split between the 'normal' world – a fairly

PLAYED
IT

**THIS IS ONE OF THE DEEPEST
CHARACTER CREATION
SYSTEMS I'VE SEEN IN AN RPG**



PREVIEW

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous



The party explores a subterranean village.



You can set up a camp in the wilderness to heal your party.



I prefer real-time with pause combat. I'm old school like that.



Backgrounds are fully 3D rather than pre-rendered.



typical Tolkien-esque high fantasy setting – and the Worldwound, a freaky, demon-haunted wasteland teeming with all manner of unholy monsters and dark magic. A fair is taking place in Kenabres, but the festivities are interrupted by a battle between a giant insect-like demon and a dragon. Amid the chaos, the ground is torn apart and I fall into the crack.

BUG REPORT

Down in a spider-infested cavern lit by glowing blue mushrooms, I team up with a few other survivors of the attack on the fair and get a taste of one of *WotR*'s many dungeons. The game features both turn-based and Infinity Engine-style real-time with pause combat – and you can switch between them on the fly, which is nice. The fighting is pretty standard for a CRPG, but the true depth of these games' combat systems doesn't fully reveal itself until you have a full party, a stuffed spellbook, and tougher enemies to battle.

As I explore the dungeon I find a magical sword imbued with heavenly light, which gives me the opportunity to start one of those Mythic Paths – specifically the Angel one. I accept. Later, deep in the caverns I find a subterranean village inhabited by demon-slaying crusaders who avoid the surface, preferring to dwell in the dark. Some of the adventurers in my party refer to them derisively as 'mongrels', while others seem to have more respect for them. I reveal my newfound heavenly powers to the chief and he weeps with joy. Some children have gone missing from the village, and he hopes that I'll be able to rescue them.

The children are being held in a place called the Shield Maze – which, lucky for me, is also a route back to the surface. By revealing my angelic powers to the chief, he's managed to recruit other clans in the depths to join their assault on the maze. I've become a beacon of hope for these people, it seems. It also turns out that the caverns were just an appetiser for the maze, which is a much bigger and more elaborate dungeon. I've been down here so long, I almost forgot I started in Kenabres. I'm not sure if a labyrinth of caves is the most impactful way to kick off an RPG, but I guess it worked for *Oblivion*.

I GO FULL ANGEL, UNLEASHING A BLAST OF HOLY ENERGY THAT KILLS THE DEMON

Things get more interesting when I enter the Shield Maze, a candlelit medieval castle decorated with creepy stone gargoyles. Well, relatively. So far, the art in *Wrath of the Righteous* hasn't blown me away. Everything I've seen so far in this early beta, and in trailers released by the developer, has looked very fantasy-by-numbers. This is such a well-trodden genre, you really have to work to stand out, and I'm not feeling that here. Things might get more visually distinctive when I enter the Worldwound and see the demon-flavoured half of the setting, but so far I'm finding it all rather dull.

CRAWL AND SUNDRY

In the maze I encounter signs of strange rituals being performed, imp-like demons and underground warriors whose minds have been corrupted, turning them violent towards their former friends. I make my way through the dungeon, slaying beasts, looting chests, disarming traps, and finding keys to unlock doors and travel deeper inside. Reaching the deepest point, I find myself face to face with a demon: the source of all the strife in the maze and those kids disappearing. I'm given two options: unleash my heavenly power, doubling down on the Angel Mythic Path; or embrace the darkness and travel down the Demon path instead. I go full Angel, unleashing a blast of holy energy that kills the demon.

After about four hours in the gloom, I leave the Shield Maze behind and find myself back in Kenabres at last – but things aren't much better in the city, where a full-on demonic invasion is taking place. Overall, this introduction sequence does a fair job of establishing *WotR*'s world and story, and giving you a flavour of the role-playing to come. But I'm a little underwhelmed. The game is deeply steeped in the worn-out old tropes of the genre, and nothing has grabbed me as particularly interesting or compelling yet as a result. I'm hoping things get more interesting later, because the CRPG is a genre I sincerely want to thrive on PC.

It's the Mythic Paths that I'm most intrigued by. Even with just a small taste of the Angel path, I can see it becoming something that could give this game an edge over others in the genre. There are eight of them in total, and I'll be interested to see how pursuing these paths impacts the story and your character's personality. *Wrath of the Righteous* is set for release in summer this year.

Andy Kelly

PREVIEW

Let's Build a Zoo

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Springloaded

PUBLISHER
No More Robots

LINK
letsbuildazoo.com

LET'S BUILD A ZOO

The Island of Dr Moreau, but
with more expensive fast food

That title really buries the lede. Sure, this is cutesy management sim that does indeed invite you to build a zoo, and deal with all that entails. You'll need to buy in animals, hire staff, keep your visitors happy and all that jazz. But this game's real USP is that it lets you commit crimes against God.

FIRST LOOK

By which I mean, a full DNA splicing system lets you help your park stand out by combining animals into freakish new hybrids. Splice a chicken with a cow, and buddy you've got a chickow – your very own hulking, clucking monstrosity.

Does a crocoduck eat bread, or people? Can an owlybara still fly? And how exactly can a giraffe neck hold up the full weight of an elephant's head? We can only hope these questions and more will be answered when this work of irresponsible genius lurches its way onto our screens.

Robin Valentine

Join the conversation!



Discuss all things PC gaming with fellow
readers at our official forums

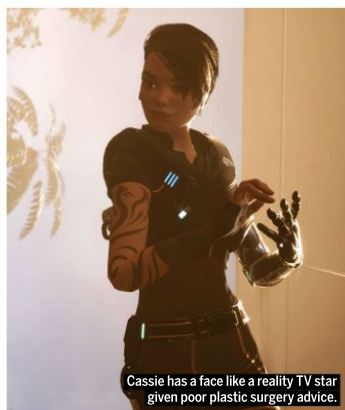
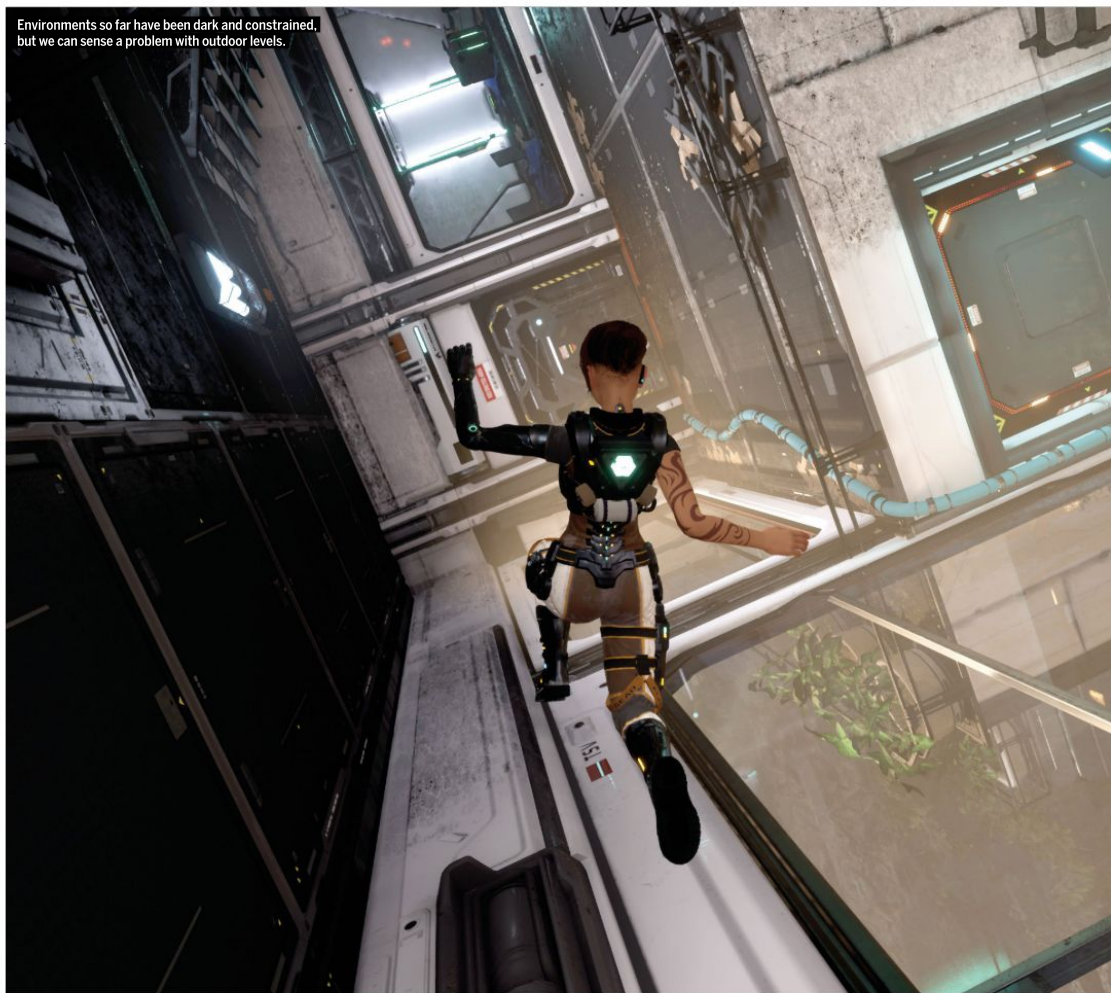
forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER

PREVIEW

Sky Beneath

Environments so far have been dark and constrained, but we can sense a problem with outdoor levels.



Cassie has a face like a reality TV star given poor plastic surgery advice.

The gravity-switching mechanic is extremely cool and lots of fun.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021DEVELOPER
Mindhaven GamesPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
mindhavengames.com

SKY BENEATH

Oh what a feeling, when we're
puzzling on the ceiling

There is no fall damage in *Sky Beneath*, which turns out to be a lucky thing. Arcing over so my feet point perpendicularly to where they used to be, I drop to the wall of a lift shaft and then, with another 90-degree flip, drop all the way down it as far as I can go.

The demo I run through gives a half-hour slice of the beginning of the game, in which our hero breaks into a run-down science facility while chatting with an off-screen ally, and attempts to get her 'gravity suit' powered up. Once this is achieved, she makes her way to the lift shaft in an attempt to access the R&D division, locked beyond a large door. The key to opening the door, it disappointingly turns out, is to put a block on a pressure pad. Apparently no one had thought to try this since some vaguely defined aliens left.

The first few minutes of play give you an idea of what's coming up, as you use another block to climb up onto a ledge that's otherwise too high. This isn't *Broken Sword*-style block-pushing; you're literally just placing them where they'll be the most helpful, to reach higher places or set off a pressure pad. It's not an encouraging start.

There are other problems too, including a character model that's both distinctly old-fashioned looking in the way she stares blankly into the distance, and yet also from the school of design that states more is always better. So we get

tattoos, scars, a robot arm, an earpiece, hair ornaments, straps, lights and body armour. She's a lot to take in, while at the same time being pretty generic, and oddly doesn't cast a shadow or reflection.

FLOAT ON

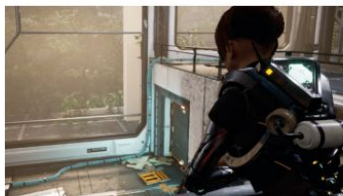
I'll stop moaning about that, however, and concentrate on how cool the gravity suit is. Hold the right mouse button and a blue hologram of your body appears, and you can use this to shift gravity through 90 degrees. Thus the walls become floors, then the ceiling. This is the secret to traversing the building, which was once shared with creatures known as 'Azurians' for whom gravity was something that happened to other species, and who walked on the ceilings as a result.

Cassie and Annie, protagonist and conversational partner respectively, keep up their dialogue as you explore, dropping new snippets each time you travel in the right direction. So I learn that while the Azurians didn't care much for human comfort in their labs, this is no problem for a human in a gravity suit. And it will be even less of a problem if the floaty jumping and running are tightened up before release.

The world rotates around you as you flip gravity, so you're never actually hanging upside down from the ceiling or running along any edge of your monitor except for the bottom one. And while this would have been novel, I can see why the decision was taken – it would remove the feeling that the three-dimensional mazes you're asked to traverse become a different environment after you flip them. Encroachment by plant life and openings caused by damage mean you may need to refer to a nearby poster to tell you which way is up.

With its ruined-building aesthetic, 3D puzzles, and glimpses of advanced technology, there's a hint of *Portal 2* about *Sky Beneath*. Only just though: I hope the full game opens out into a glorious playground where gravity is something you toy with for your amusement and to the detriment of the bad guys you smash together and drop down lift shafts – there has to be a use for that robot arm, after all. We really hope there are no more block-and-pressure-pad moments.

Ian Evenden



Wobbly energy barriers mean instant death, but restarts are quick.

**YOU MAY NEED TO REFER TO
A NEARBY POSTER TO TELL
YOU WHICH WAY IS UP**

War Mongrels



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
SeptemberDEVELOPER
Destructive CreationsPUBLISHER
In-house, All Incl GamesLINK
warmongrels.com

WAR MONGRELS

Sneak, shoot, and die a lot in this formidable WWII tactics game

Typical, isn't it? You wait ages for a grizzled World War II real-time tactics game set on the eastern front, then two come along at once. Last year's *Partisans: 1941* was an excellent take on the *Commandos* formula, and now *War Mongrels* seeks to do the same from a different perspective, with missions so challenging they will make you cry blood.

Taking place in 1944, *War Mongrels* sees you assume control of a Dirty-Dozen-style group of saboteurs who attempt to undermine the Nazi war machine as it slowly retreats from Soviet advance. Interestingly, your first two characters are themselves former Wehrmacht soldiers. Evald is a reluctant Silisian draftee, while Manfred is a former hero of the Nazis imprisoned for refusing to fire on a group of unarmed civilians.

DOGGED DETERMINATION

The preview build offered two complete missions of a planned twelve. The first charts Manfred and Evald's escape from the penal battalion, sneaking along the frontline while the Wehrmacht is locked in intense battle with the advancing Soviets. The second sees them team up with a Lithuanian dissident named Lukas to destroy a railway bridge the Nazis are using to transport Polish civilians for execution. Both levels show *War Mongrels* to be an unflinching depiction of war and a brutally challenging tactics game, albeit one that still needs considerable polish.

Rick Lane

YOUR FIRST TWO CHARACTERS ARE THEMSELVES FORMER WEHRMACHT SOLDIERS

1 *War Mongrels'* deadly patrol puzzles are extremely difficult to untangle. In this image, I need to retrieve a key from an SS Officer. But not only is he immune to distractions and can see through disguises, he's also crisscrossed from multiple angles by guard sightlines.

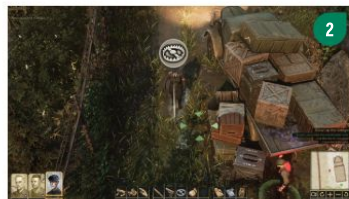
2 Each character has their own set of abilities. Manfred can disguise himself as an SS soldier and use his watch to lure guards away from their posts. Evald, meanwhile, can throw a bottle of hooch on the ground to distract guards.

3 *War Mongrels* is not a pure stealth game. At any point during play you can enter Combat Mode, taking control of a character and letting rip with rifles and machine-guns. Firearms should be used with caution as they have a wide audible radius, and will bring a swarm of Nazis down on you.

4 *War Mongrels'* story is more personal than most games about WWII. Playing as a renegade German soldier makes for an interesting perspective, while the game doesn't flinch from depicting the worst of the war's atrocities.

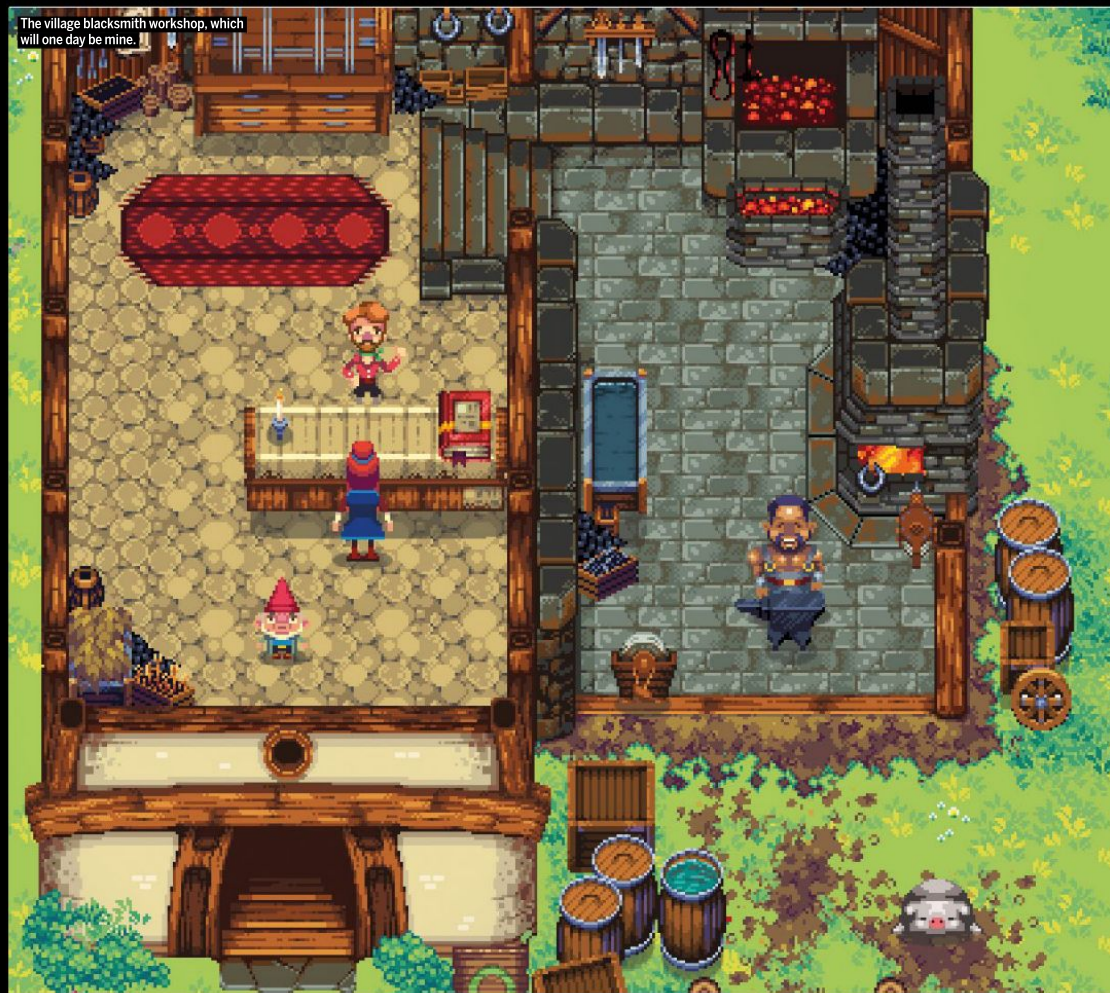
5 The visual spectacle *War Mongrels* offers is impressive. The first mission takes place to the backdrop of an intense battle. The second is set in a picturesque farming village surrounded by green hedgerows and verdant forest. It's a brown game, but a pretty one regardless.

6 Judging how challenging *War Mongrels* will be in its final version is difficult, as the build I played suffered from numerous bugs. Commands wouldn't always register and my squad tended to get stuck in scenery. The build has no manual save function and the autosave trapped me in tricky situations.





The village blacksmith workshop, which will one day be mine.



These brass contraptions help you make medicinal creams.

Chuck some strawberries in, stir the pot, and you get jam. It's that easy.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
PixelCount Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
pixelcountstudios.com

KYNSEED

At the mercy of harvest gods and grumpy neighbours

So *Kynseed* is an RPG about growing up, getting old, and dying, which is quite ironic since it feels like the game has been on Steam in various builds since forever. It actually first appeared on the platform back in 2018, when *GreenLight* was still a thing, and it's now finally out. Well, in Early Access at least.

Although the game's development timeline is somewhat lengthy, it's understandable looking at the scope of the game. After jumping in and starting a save in the most recent build, the *Apothecary* update, it's almost overwhelming how much there is to do. It's a life sim RPG like *Stardew Valley* but with less emphasis on farming. You have a farm as your main source of income – you can plant, nurture, harvest, and sell crops – but it's only one aspect of your new rural life.

If a game has farming, it takes a lot to pull me away from getting stuck in, but *Kynseed*'s ancient woodlands, fairy myths, and fantasy folklore are worth getting completely lost in. When you realise that *Kynseed* is being developed by three ex-*Fable* developers, you begin to see the influence everywhere. There are druidic stone circles, giant wooden wicker-man structures, and god-awful puns. There are even gods and goddesses you can worship. You can lay down daily offerings, and they'll buff or curse your harvest in return.

You can completely ignore your horticultural calling and start meeting the

locals, of which there are a lot. Many of the NPCs have yet to have their dialogue fully fleshed out, but you can still give them gifts and become friends with them. I have started to try and win the hearts of my farm's neighbours, including the hermit to the west who babbles complete nonsense, and the passive-aggressive family to the south – although that relationship isn't helped by the fact that I accidentally stole an apple from their tree. Looks like 'finders keepers' doesn't apply in *Kynseed*.

FARM'S WAY

Kynseed's aim is to have a society of characters that not only are affected by your actions, but also grow old and eventually die, meaning that families will remember your apple stealing wrongdoings for generations. This inter-generational feature is a long way off, but eventually, you'll get to see your characters grow old and play out the next generation, passing down your possessions to your children.

Running your own business is a major pull for me in *Kynseed* and there are multiple places you can buy. The main ones are the tavern, blacksmith, general store, and apothecary, and each one has its own crafting minigames. I am still but a humble farmhand, but I do have my eye on the apothecary. The crafting stations involve you working with a mortar and pestle for herbs, using interconnected brass tubes to make creams, and a big ol' witchy cauldron to create potions.

Until you're ready to become a business owner, you can help out residents with their needs and get money in return, or even run a stall in the town market where you can set the price and sell your produce. You can dig up materials in the mines, use a fishing rod to fish, and cook up recipes with a cooking minigame.

I've not even talked about taking part in auctions, travelling to other regions, delving into the depths of the mines, organising romantic dates, pig racing – there's a lot for an Early Access title that costs less than your lunch, and there's still more to come. I admire the scope and ambition of *Kynseed* and I can tell I'm going to be in it for the long haul. That is, if it ever actually hits 1.0.

Rachel Watts



My group of humble cabbage patches.

FAMILIES WILL REMEMBER YOUR WRONGDOINGS FOR GENERATIONS

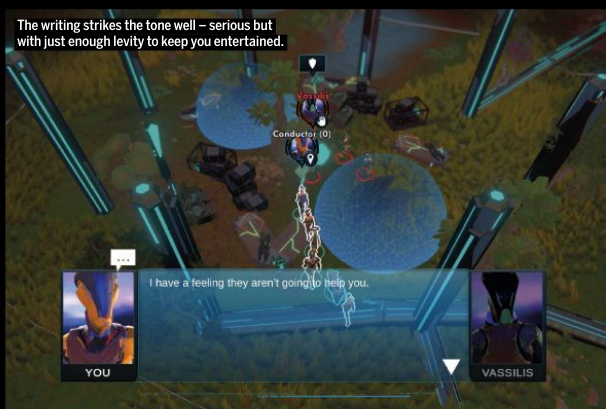
EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

We Are the Caretakers



Each character class has multiple sub-classes with different abilities.

The writing strikes the tone well – serious but with just enough levity to keep you entertained.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Heart Shaped Games LLC

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
wearethecaretakers.com

WE ARE THE CARETAKERS

Putting the 'game' in 'game reserve'

This sci-fi RPG puts you in the role of a team of wildlife protection agents on a planet where said wildlife is crucial to the survival of civilisation. Led by a figure known as the Conductor, you dispatch teams of Caretakers around the planet to protect a species of animal known as the Raun from poachers.

The game's closest analogue is probably *XCOM*, although play has three distinct phases rather than two. Each of the game's four 'Eras' is split into various missions, which involve guiding one or several teams of Caretakers around a chunk of 3D terrain. Objectives vary from scouting sectors to tagging animals, but most will involve fighting poachers at some point. When you encounter these bandit hunters, the game switches to a Final-Fantasy-style battle, where each side takes turns hitting each other in various ways until one is defeated. Missions typically culminate in a climactic boss fight, after which you return to base to upgrade your characters, recruit new Caretakers, and research new technologies.

None of this is what makes *We Are the Caretakers* interesting, however. That would be the storytelling and, specifically, using narrative to explore the nuances of wildlife conservation. As an organisation, the Caretakers are awkwardly positioned between farmers and settlers, and larger political institutions, neither of whose interests may square with the Caretakers' priority of protecting the Raun.

This social and political friction is detailed in several ways. During missions, you'll come across various settlements, all of which have differing attitudes to both the Caretakers and the Raun. Some will happily work with you, but many are frustrated by the Raun's tendencies to trample crops and destroy buildings, resorting to poaching out of a feeling of necessity rather than naked profiteering.

ON THE RAUN

Meanwhile, after a battle, poachers can be detained by the Caretakers. What you can do with them depends on both your discretion and their circumstances. Some can be sent on for trial, but others might offer up valuable intel or even a bribe to let them go. A few even have powerful political connections, and you may end up bribing them to stop them harming the Caretakers' reputation. This isn't a thematic device either, Reputation is the game's primary currency, with a low Rep affecting various factors like the quality of recruits, the aggression of poachers, and even the game's ending.

PLAYED IT

The role-playing potential here is strong, which is good because elsewhere *We Are the Caretakers* is pretty rough. Currently, the exploration phase feels quite empty.

With only a few points of interest per mission, exploration mostly involves moving your Caretakers around and waiting for actions to resolve. Battles are more engaging. There are a range of character classes which further diversify as those characters level up, while you also get a pet Raun who grows bigger and more powerful as the game goes on.

Sadly, combat also suffers from a fair number of bugs, one of which dampens effect audio almost completely, which makes encounters feel underwhelming.

I wasn't thrilled by *We Are the Caretakers*, but I nonetheless came away intrigued. The way it explores the politics of conservation is convincing, and the way your decisions affect the Caretakers' reputation is a neat idea. That said, it needs a good amount of polish, as well as bulking out in certain areas like the exploration phase. Let's hope the dev can nurture this likeable runt into a healthy and robust adult come release time.

Rick Lane



YOU GET A PET WHO GROWS BIGGER AND MORE POWERFUL AS THE GAME GOES ON

Dorfromantik



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£8

DEVELOPER
Toukana Interactive

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/DorfGame

DORFROMANTIK

Welcome to the
build-a-burg workshop

Of all the tiles in *Dorfromantik* – tiles that snap together in magical ways – edge pieces are the cruellest. There's a finality at odds with the endless nature of this procedural jigsaw, whose forests, towns, rivers and railways want to expand in every direction – not be curtailed by the results of a lucky dip.

Dorfromantik is a puzzle game, but also a city builder, and sort of a board game. You spend your time constructing settlements, and all the necessary stuff around them: forests, train tracks, rivers, and patchwork fields, by placing hexagonal tiles that are randomly drawn, one at a time from a pile on the screen. You don't get to choose between tiles, or remove ones that have been set already, although you are allowed a glimpse of upcoming tiles, to better plan out your world.

Why are you doing this? Not to increase a population, or make a happiness slider go up, but to appease the tiles themselves, many of whom have their own 'quests' you'll want to fulfil. For example, this clump of trees wants exactly 54 trees connected to it, while this town tile wants to cosy up to at least 15 other houses. As long as you've formed a chain – a chain of hexagonal edges – then you can connect the tiles in any shape you like.

HEX CELLS

While points are awarded for merely slotting themed tiles together – trees beside trees, houses by houses, with as

many of each tile touching as you damn well like – you earn the big bucks by fulfilling quests, an action that additionally rewards you with a few more tiles. The draw pile is limited, counting down with every hex you place, so completing quests is the only way to stave off the inevitable game over – in the high-score-chasing Classic mode, at least. It's the only mode currently in the game, and its implementation of scores is limited. Mainly, the game encourages multiple playthroughs by tantalising with brand new tiles and tile reskins.

Every tile you unlock is shuffled into the deck for future games, making *Dorfromantik*'s worlds a little more interesting each time you unlock something. But even with just the basic toolset, you're capable of crafting some truly idyllic scenery.

In a traditional building game, you're trying to build a functioning thing: a settlement, usually, one that meets the needs of its inhabitants even as it expands. Generally you're free to make this settlement an orderly utopia, or an ugly, sprawling mess.

Dorfromantik, on the other hand, is a game about making beautiful places. Its quest system encourages, and ultimately cultivates an aesthetic approach to urban and environmental planning. Not too many houses here, it says, but let's have lots of forest over here. And would it kill you to start laying down a second waterway?

Tiles update to match their surroundings, so a small cluster of houses will give the impression of a rural hamlet, while a sprawling conurbation will automatically be painted in an urban grey. The end result is a game that, on a basic level, will always be beautiful. But it takes skill to join its tactile tiles in ways that will both maximise your score and, more importantly, extend your game session, letting you expand the borders of your map, fill in any gaps and better realise the potential of each model world.

I will be curious to see how *Dorfromantik* expands from here, as its tile-laying core is as rock-solid as they come. More biomes and tiles should help with the slight lack of variation, but this is already an engrossing puzzle game.

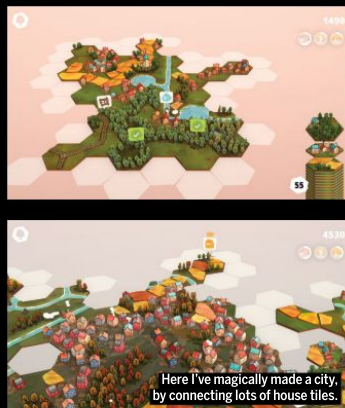
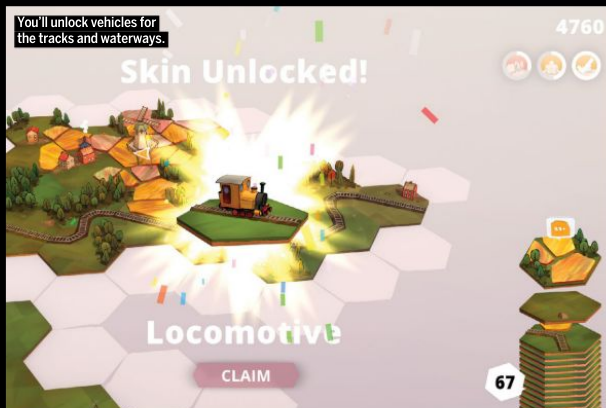
Tom Sykes

It really is a beautiful game.



Vehicles will loop round rather than fall off sheer edges.

WITH JUST THE BASIC TOOLSET
YOU'RE CAPABLE OF CRAFTING
SOME TRULY IDYLIC SCENERY



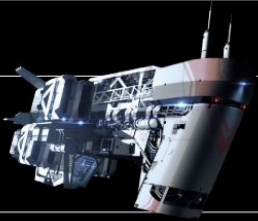
Star Dynasties

Space tyrants love watching explosions.



I'd demand a bigger throne.
This one isn't intimidating at all.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Pawley Games

PUBLISHER
Iceberg Interactive

LINK
stardynasties.com

STAR DYNASTIES

Infidelity is more effective than a Death Star in this strategy game

Space tyrants always seem like they're having fun, just going around shooting lasers at planets they don't like. But it's all a facade. I've been trying to conquer the galaxy in *Star Dynasties*, but I've been too busy dealing with scandals and feeling sorry for myself.

Things aren't going well for Duke Fraser. My mum, who was also my best general, just died. I had to exile my brother after he had an affair with my wife. I'm having an affair of my own, and it might be a little bit responsible for a civil war. And you know what? I don't think we even know how to make lasers. I'm pretty sure I can salvage this disaster, however, because I've played quite a bit of *Crusader Kings*.

Star Dynasties invites the comparison, but as an Early Access game being created by a small dev, expecting something with the scope of Paradox's massive strategy games is unrealistic. Instead of trying to match the breadth of *Crusader Kings 3*, it focuses even more on its conniving nobles, while empire management and military strategy play more of a supporting role. It's proving to be the right balance.

It's a slimmer strategy game, but that also makes it a lot less daunting. I love the chaos of *CK3*, knowing that as soon as I unpause it the whole world will spring to life and start unravelling my plans, but I also appreciate the structure of *Star Dynasties*. Being turn-based, it's more orderly, giving you something to hold onto when things threaten to get messy. An action point

system encourages you to prioritise, because there are only so many times you can exert your influence per turn.

Despite this limitation, I frequently find myself with excess points. I'm craving more ways to influence the galaxy and a sense of progression that goes beyond expanding borders and developing relationships. I quite fancy the idea of slowly fleshing out my realm with laws and cultural traits, but any kind of meaningful improvement would be welcome. 'Get big' is a nice, simple objective, but an elaborate strategy game like this deserves some more nuanced paths to victory.

WAR GAMES

When the drama and intrigue turns into open conflict, *Star Dynasties* takes an abstract approach. Instead of building ships, recruiting armies, and moving your armadas around the galaxy, combat can be kicked off with just a few clicks. When you're ready for war, you select the vassals you want to call on, assign a commander, and then the battle begins immediately. When the fleets meet, you get to make decisions based on the commander's

PLAYED IT

abilities, with the aim being to counter your enemy or find their weakness. You get to make the important calls, but you don't have to worry about military admin.

Star Dynasties has its own ideas about how to marry strategy and roleplaying, and it's shaping up to be a bit more than *Crusader Kings* in space, but it could do with borrowing one more thing from its historical counterpart: flavour. The text is often terse and there's hardly any evidence of the sci-fi setting. Despite not being the space opera I was hoping for, however, it can still be a capable storyteller, creating galaxy-shaking events out of even seemingly insignificant moments, like my love life. I could not have predicted that hooking up with my liege to bolster my standing would inspire a civil war, but here we are. Sorry, galaxy.

Though there are gaps, and it still needs an identity, I'm invested in the lives of these dysfunctional nobles. Pawley Games estimates that it will be in Early Access for six months, and I look forward to discovering new ways to ruin the galaxy. In the meantime, I've got a civil war to fight.

Fraser Brown

IT'S A SLIMMER STRATEGY GAME, BUT THAT ALSO MAKES IT A LOT LESS DAUNTING



The right marriage or even a secret affair can give you a political edge.

COVER FEATURE

Darkest Dungeon II



DARKEST DUNGEON II CHARTS A NEW PATH THROUGH

RIDE

TERROR IN A ROGUELIKE ROAD TRIP TO SAVE HUMANITY.

OR

JUST MIND THE 'NEXT EXIT: MADNESS' SIGNS.

DIE

By Wes Fenlon



T

he world is dying. Tendrils of darkness crawl across the land, swallowing up everything but the battered road ahead and your flickering torch, the world's last hope for salvation. The apocalypse has arrived – but if that sounds bleak, you've probably never played *Darkest Dungeon*.

"The first *Darkest Dungeon*, the further you go down, the worse and worse and worse it gets," says Red

Hook co-founder and creative director Chris Bourassa. Chris is about to convince me that this game about the end of the world, full of lost souls and horrifying monsters, is actually about *hope*. *Darkest Dungeon II* is a road trip, a roguelike mash-up of *Darkest Dungeon* and *The Oregon Trail* about clawing your way out of the darkness, rather than descending ever deeper into it.

LAST WAGON OUT OF HELL

"The more you learn about The Ancestor, the worse of a guy he is," Bourassa says, looking back on the story he and co-founder Tyler Sigman created for *Darkest Dungeon* starting in 2014. "This guy was the worst piece of shit in history. You get to the end of the game and you're like, not only is he the worst, but the whole world is the worst, *everything's* the worst... I feel like six years into Obama we were all ready to have some fun with nihilism, but it just didn't feel like we could go any further down. We went to the heart of the actual planet, revealed it's a monster, and then nothing matters."

DARKEST DUNGEON II WANTS YOU TO CARE MORE ABOUT YOUR FLAWED HEROES

In Red Hook's first game, surviving a 40-plus-hour campaign meant putting dozens of heroes through the grinder and watching them go insane, then replacing them with fresh meat. *Darkest Dungeon II* wants you to care more about your flawed heroes. It's keeping the idea of quirks and stress creating unexpected, sometimes maddening surprises. But this time you'll be

managing a party of only four heroes on a roguelike run to an ominous mountain, a brisk five hours if you survive the journey.

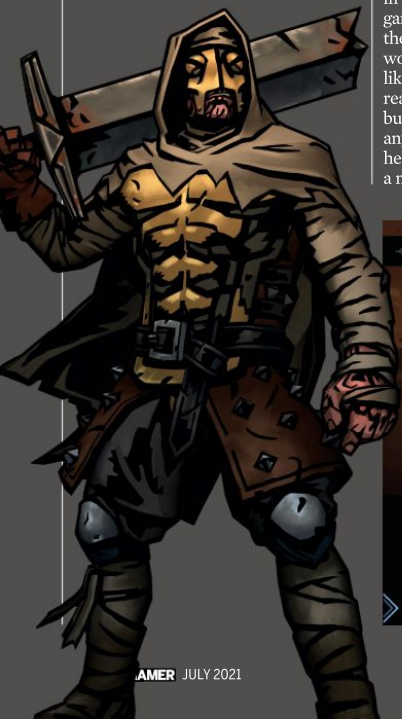
Shorter runs will hopefully be more inviting for

players intimidated by the first game's enormous campaign. Like other modern roguelikes, there's meta progression between runs. And like *Hades*, *DDII* will have a story that evolves over the course of development in Early Access. The idea is for the game to be easier to get into but just as deep once you're hooked. "We want more people to feel worse," jokes Bourassa.

"There's some games where once you have the sequel there's no reason

ABOVE: So... you guys into chains?

BELOW: The skull meter in the corner tracks the progress of the darkness. Keep it low by fighting enough battles.





to go back and play the original. We wanted to do a different structure," says Tyler Sigman.

They settled on the idea of a road trip, which Sigman relates to the teensy-bit-brighter tone, likening it to Lord of the Ring's quest to Mordor. The trip may be brutally hard, but this time there's some nobility to it.

"If you go back to this whole idea of settling west, it's people trying to achieve a better or freer life than their options where they are," he says (the *Oregon Trail* reference wasn't a joke). "I think those motifs, and dunking the ring in Mount Doom, are so powerful because the end goal is worth the trials of the journey. I think that is really important. The journey is terrible. You are leaving safety and going towards the worst possible thing you could, because somebody's got to do it."

A run in *Darkest Dungeon II* looks much like a journey up the tower in *Slay the Spire* or through the stars in *FTL*. Every region is divided into branching paths, each node a battle or ruin to investigate or an encounter with survivors who need your help. Helping them is one way to keep your torch, the symbolic and literal light of hope, burning bright. Somewhere in each region is a proper dungeon, home to a tough boss fight and better loot. A powerful trinket could transform a run, but tackling it is risky: any hero you lose

RIDE IN STYLE

Upgrade your wagon with parts you collect



CROWS NEST

A chance to scout ahead and reveal the encounters at upcoming nodes.

MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

Increases the passive heal rate for heroes while travelling.

WINDCHIMES

A chance to lower stress on a random hero on each stretch of road. Ahh, soothing.

is dead for good. "I don't think we could respect ourselves or look at ourselves in the mirror if we didn't kill your characters," says Bourassa. "They can die, and you can be on a run with two characters left. But we reward your progress at the end."

ARE WE THERE YET?

Like in a real-life road trip, *Darkest Dungeon II* is all about the personalities in the car. "I've done a

few of them in my time, and you end up best friends with somebody and never talk to the other guy again, ever," says Bourassa. They've recreated that dynamic by tossing out the old afflictions caused by stress and creating an affinity system, where characters gain and lose favour with each other. Relationships have tendrils into every corner of the game. When you come to a crossroads, all four will have an opinion about which way to go. When you encounter strangers, your highwayman might want to rob them, while your man at arms wants to give them food. Whichever option you pick, somebody's likely going to end up angry and stressed. In combat, if your grave robber is near death and you have your plague doctor toss a healing potion to your highwayman instead, how do you think the grave robber's going to react?

Rack up enough positive or negative reactions and characters will form relationships. Good ones will pay dividends: friendly heroes might "pull a Kevin Costner bodyguard" or "double up Capcom style on the enemy", Bourassa says. But this being *Darkest Dungeon*, there are a few million ways for relationships to go terribly, terribly wrong.

"We like that every run can have a story. You can have a grave robber who gets hit with too much stress early on, then just gets real crummy



to everybody. Hateful with the man at arms, jealous of the highwayman, just a toxic person. But she's probably better off alive than dead for the health of you run. That becomes the story of that time you had that awful lady in the back of the car and she was really mean to everyone."

Character quirks like 'clumsy' or 'kleptomaniac' will affect how members of your party play off each other, and stress piled on by being dragged to the dungeon or watching a friend die in battle can make them spiral out of control. Unlike in the first game, a full stress meter won't trigger a heart attack – it'll trigger a meltdown, where their health drops to death's door and all their relationships are reset. Their ensuing tantrum will stress everyone else out too, of course.

There may be runs where you intentionally trigger a meltdown to reset nasty relationships. You can also try to build positive bonds at the inn where your weary band will rest at the end of every region (it replaces camping from the first *Darkest Dungeon*). You can have your characters share a game of cards or a bottle of booze and hope they hit it off, but a negative quirk like egomania could make your good intentions backfire. "We always want to put you in a place where you're trying to make the most of a sub-optimal situation," says Sigman.

ABOVE: The world is literally falling apart around you.

BELOW RIGHT: Yep, that's pretty much the definition of 'things you don't want to run into in the dark'.

BATTLE LINES

If you haven't played much *Darkest Dungeon*, combat in the sequel will look much the same to you. Your

party still stands in a line, a selection of skills below. Each character's position is key, since skills can only hit certain distances. With each attack you get a cutaway animation as blade or bullet hits flesh.

If you *have* played a great deal of *Darkest Dungeon*, combat will look strikingly different. It's in 3D now, for

one thing, as is the whole rest of the game. Characters have bigger bodies and smaller heads, no longer cartoonishly proportioned.

"There's really amazing preparatory animations in combat," Bourassa says. "If you click 'wicked slice' on your highwayman he whips his knife out and gets ready, and when

you click a target he follows through. The result is combat feels way more alive. People are getting potions out and then launching them on your

**YOU CAN HAVE YOUR
CHARACTERS
SHARE A GAME OF
CARDS OR A BOTTLE
OF BOOZE**





WHO'S WHO?

You'll have nine heroes to choose from at Early Access launch



GRAVE ROBBER

Armed with darts and throwing daggers, the grave robber is a speedy killer with an excellent hat.



OCCULTIST

A wielder of dark powers and strong crit chance who's especially good against eldritch creatures.



PLAGUE DOCTOR

A potion specialist who can heal allies and blight foes from the back row.



MAN AT ARMS

A defender who can buff allies with block tokens, keeping them alive (as healing is a rare treat).



LEPER

A frontline bruiser who knocks back enemies and gets blind tokens after big swings. May need glasses.



JESTER

The sickle and lute aren't a likely pair, but the Jester uses it to buff friends and make enemies bleed.



HIGHWAYMAN

With pistol in one hand and knife in the other, the highwayman isn't someone you want to run into.



HELLION

The Hellion, who had a starring role in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, uses a giant glaive to slice up enemy back rows.



UNKNOWN

What role will this mysterious newcomer fill? My guess is another heavy frontliner.

72 leagues to Inn

Darkstone





» mouse clicks. Once you get into a flow, if you watch someone who knows how to play, even though it's turn-based it feels very fluid."

There are even more dramatic mechanical changes. Characters no longer have upgradeable armour or weapons, or stats

like dodge and accuracy. These sweeping changes make combat 'chunkier' – designer speak for 'easier to understand.'

Clearer information makes each turn more of a puzzle to solve than a slugfest to endure.

Darkest Dungeon II's battle makeover started with a radical move: ditching accuracy altogether. "We found over time that people just dislike missing so much that we ended up tuning up accuracy quite a lot over the lifetime of the [first] game," Sigman says. "So what if

ALMOST ALL THE EFFECTS FROM THE FIRST GAME HAVE BEEN CONVERTED TO TOKENS

we just got rid of accuracy as a stat? You hit. You know you're going to hit – unless the opponent is dodgy, unless they have a block." To convey a dodge or a block, they condensed percent chances into tokens that represent concrete effects. If your

character or an enemy has a block token, they're guaranteed to absorb 50% of their next hit.

"We started doing that with all the mechanics and it was kind of an

experiment at first. The concern was what if we make it too simple, but it ended up working." Sigman compares the token system to a card game like *Hearthstone*, where if an enemy has a creature with taunt on the board, that's an obstacle to work around. Almost all the effects from the first game have been converted to tokens – immobilise, stun, bleed, blind, even team-up combo attacks.

"It gets people thinking a little bit more," Bourassa adds. "I found that it erodes the natural inclination we saw in the first game for people to just use damaging attacks all day long." And so you now get to

see the next few turns in the turn order, letting you plan out multiple moves in advance.

TRINKET FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Characters do still have some stats: hit points, speed and resistances to status ailments like blight. But the simpler pool helped Sigman go wild designing trinkets, the only gear you'll be equipping. Once you found a trinket in the first game you could keep it forever, so popular strategies revolved around the most powerful ones. Trinkets usually had a negative stat trade-off, but only a few stats *really* mattered, so the design options were limited.

In *DDII* you may get lucky and find an awesome trinket in one run, but it'll be gone the next. "So basically we can get crazy," Sigman says. Instead of percent tweaks to stats, trinkets can now grant effects like starting every round with a pair of block tokens, or getting a crit token every time you miss an attack (which could stack well on the leper, who blinds himself after landing big hits). "That's the fun of a true roguelike. Sometimes you have a run and you get a crazy item and you're like 'I'm unstoppable'. That's a really fun place to be as a player." Trinkets will be divided into some standard loot tiers:

ABOVE: Every hit gets a nice close-up.

BELOW: The best part of every road trip: snacks!





commons, rares, epics. But there will also be trinkets unique to certain bosses and certain factions of enemies. Those will dangle an incentive to chance taking on a dungeon or fighting a tough battle against cultists to luck into a particular drop.

"There are a lot of trinket-based interactions and class skill interactions you can try to maximise," says Bourassa. "There's a lot of ways you can mitigate a class's downsides with trinkets and some help from his friends. That's awesome, but where we're hoping our game really comes into its own is 'what if they hate each other?' They won't do [what you say], so you're sort of stymied even though you do have the optimal strategy in mind. I think that's quintessentially what we've tried to explore."

SKILLS FOR KILLS

Darkest Dungeon II is launching with nine heroes: eight familiar haggard faces and one new one still under wraps. Each returning class is now significantly expanded, from a pool of seven skills to eleven. You unlock more advanced skills by completing special encounters for each hero on multiple runs.

"We want you to feel rewarded that you put some time in the game. It directly translates into more flexibility in the run, more team

MEMORIES OF MURDER

Darkest Dungeon II vs Darkest Dungeon

1. Normal sized head.

2. Sophisticated skeleton.

3. Oh look, world's burning.

4. Turn order offers a bit of foresight.

5. Stress and health meters are virtually identical

6. Block tokens mean they'll take 50% less damage from the next hit

DARKEST DUNGEON II



DARKEST DUNGEON



7. Choose five abilities to use in the battle instead of four.

8. Oh look, a dungeon.

9. Big head.

10. Dumb skeleton.

11. No need for a dungeon layout on the combat screen anymore.

12. DDII doesn't have these gear slots (but you do still equip an item).



STABBING 2.0

A peek at some of the unlockable skills in Darkest Dungeon II



LEPER



INTIMIDATE
Taunts an enemy and hits them with a weaken token. Ideal to use on heavy hitting baddies.



RUIN
When the leper gets hit, he gains a stacking damage buff. Pair it with a taunt and hulk out.



GRAVE ROBBER



GLINT IN THE DARK
A powerful attack that ignores stealth and 20% of deathblow resistance.



ABSINTHE
If under 25% HP, they heals for 25% and gets a speed token and three dodge tokens to avoid attacks.



HIGHWAYMAN



HIGHWAY ROBBERY
Destroys any positive tokens an enemy might have on them, leaving them wide open.



POINT BLANK SHOT
Places a combo token for a team-up attack, but can only hit when the enemy in the front row.

» comps you can put together, and a greater chance of success," says Sigman. "It's not that we give you crappy skills to start, but the more skills you have the more you can adjust to the changing conditions on the road."

Those unlocks will go hand-in-hand with learning *Darkest Dungeon II*'s regions, so you'll know when you head into a region where enemies have high blight resistance, it's time to adjust your plague doctor's loadout. You can swap out skills on the road between encounters.

But Red Hook never giveth without taketh away. You can no longer have multiple copies of the same hero in your party, and each run you have to choose from a bunch of heroes pre-rolled with a good and bad quirk. "It's not like Wizardry from the 1980s where you keep rolling till you get 18s across the board," says Sigman. "If you really wanted a leper this run but he's a pacifist or whatever, that makes you really choose."

Restricting you to a just single hero type per-party made the game easier to design – Sigman no longer has to think about what a party of four lepers plays like. But that decision was ultimately more about the characters themselves, "It keeps that experience of each hero being super unique and vital as a key part to that SWAT team."



FORWARD UNTO DAWN

Darkest Dungeon ended up with 18 classes after years of expansions. *Darkest Dungeon II* will grow, too. It's coming to Early Access in Q3 2021, and you'll be able to complete a run from the get-go: if you survive long enough to haul your flickering torch to the mountain's peak, ready to stop the world from crumbling, you won't be greeted by an 'under construction' sign. Bourassa says to expect a five-act story, with each act bringing a new boss to fight when you reach the mountain. It'll launch with act one.

There will be four regions to struggle through at first, but the roguelike structure makes it easy to add more – likely in themed releases similar to the first game's. I imagine *Darkest Dungeon II* in its final form like a version of *Mad Max Fury Road*, where you find an epic trinket in the Bullet Farm on one run and die of blight in Gas Town on the next one.

It's hard to believe that the first game was built by a core team of just five people. Thanks to its success

more than 20 are now working on the sequel. The bigger team means there are designers focused solely on creating monsters or heroes or skills, tasks Sigman once juggled while also managing payroll. Artists and animators are doing things with the new 3D models that would require more illustrations than Bourassa could've ever created by hand. But

they're both still in the trenches.

"It was important we own it and have our hands right in it," says Bourassa. "All we know how to do is what we did the last time. If we throw all that

out and hire a bigshot producer from EA to just run the whole thing, we don't know where that leads, right? All we really know is the experience we had together. So we tried to preserve as much of that as possible and still create inroads and ownership for the team along the way. It really stems from, we don't want to fuck it up, quite frankly."

In our hours of talking about *Darkest*

Dungeon II, neither of them belaboured the connection between its more hopeful metaphor and their own intense creative process – that they both feel the need to take risks to make a videogame that satisfies them. But when my first run inevitably goes to hell and I contemplate leaving my petty egomaniac plague doctor by the side of the road, I know I'll think back to how Chris Bourassa describes the feeling he hopes this sequel can evoke after *Darkest Dungeon*'s bottomless nihilism.

"This game is more about trying to swim up, hoping you have enough air to break the surface, and the fear that you experience when you realise that it's just a little further out of reach each time," he says. "It's about trying to surface and trying to come to grips with your failures. But if you can manage to do it, there is a path to a better future." Or, at least, a path to a better trinket. ■

EXPECT A FIVE-ACT STORY, WITH EACH ACT BRINGING A NEW BOSS TO FIGHT

76 leagues to Inn

ABOVE: Drive the wagon with mouse and WASD, but just don't expect to do any drifting.



PC GAMER

SUBSCRIBE

And get a ***FREE*** Nacon
RIG400 Headset

WORTH
£40

KEY FEATURES

- **Lightweight, flexible and durable**
- **Sound-isolating earcups, with memory foam**
- **40mm high-sensitivity drivers deliver crisp powerful sound**
- **Inline controls let you easily adjust game volume and mute your mic**



THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER



SAVE
UP TO
47%

SUBSCRIBE TO **PC GAMER** TODAY FROM JUST **£35 FOR 6 MONTHS**

ONLINE AT www.magazinesdirect.com/rig400

PLEASE USE THE FULL ADDRESS TO CLAIM YOUR FREE GIFT

TERMS & CONDITIONS Offer closes 31st July 2021. Offer open to new subscribers only. Direct Debit offer is available to UK subscribers only. £35 payable by 6-monthly Direct Debit. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). Payment is non-refundable after the 14 day cancellation period unless exceptional circumstances apply. Free gift is not available on digital subscriptions. Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Gifts only available to subscribers on the UK mainland. In the unlikely event that we run out of this gift, we promise to offer you an alternative gift of the same or greater value. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0)330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm UK time or email help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

A full-page photograph of the character Scorpion from the Mortal Kombat movie. He is a man with long, dark, wavy hair, looking intensely at the camera. He wears a dark, short-sleeved gi with a wide red sash. His hands are positioned in front of him, palms facing each other, with bright orange and yellow flames or fireballs emanating from them. He is wearing a black beaded bracelet on his left wrist. The background is dark and textured, possibly a stone wall. The word "FIGHT" is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the top, and "NIGHT" is written in the same style across the bottom. Red splatters, resembling blood, are scattered around the letters.

FIGHT NIGHT

The **MORTAL KOMBAT** film wants to be taken seriously, but all you'll really care about is Scorpion vs Sub-Zero.

By Wes Fenlon



In the fiction of this new *Mortal Kombat* film, I like to imagine there's a whole crew of workers hired by thunder god Raiden to set up the lighting for the tournament arena. Floodlights with coloured gel filters to set the mood. Torches for ambiance. Maybe a few big honkin' spotlights to make sure everyone knows it's fight night. It must've been as disappointing for them as it was for me when the fighters decided not to bother waiting for an arena and just started killing each other in

whatever dark alley, dark temple, or dark house they happened to be in at the time. The lighting union will not forget this betrayal!

Whether to help hide its CG effects or to set a dark and serious tone, the new *Mortal Kombat* seems to take place almost exclusively at night. It even begins in a deeply shaded forest in feudal Japan, telling the origin story of the warriors who will eventually become Scorpion and Sub-Zero. In this telling, Scorpion is a master ninja and kind father named Hanzo Hasashi; Sub-Zero is a Chinese killer named Bi-Han, who is, for reasons unexplained, obsessed

FEATURE

Fight Night

with ending Hasashi's bloodline. He thinks he succeeds by killing Hasashi and his wife and son, but a baby daughter lives, eventually passing that bloodline down to a not-very-good MMA fighter named Cole Young. Hasashi, meanwhile, spends the next 400 years hanging out in hell, which ironically ends up making him so much cooler.

YOUNG BLOOD

Cole is our audience surrogate the normal guy drawn into the battle to save Earthrealm from Outworld. Mortal Kombat needs someone to look confused when someone else –

IT COULD'VE BEEN A LOT MORE FUN TO WATCH IF IT JUST EMBRACED THE ABSURDITY OF THE GAME SERIES

in this case a well-informed Sonya Blade – quickly explains what's going on with other worlds, secret tournaments, chosen warriors, etc.

Or does it, actually? As hinted at by the lighting, Mortal Kombat takes its premise seriously, but it could've been a lot more fun to watch if it just embraced the absurdity of a game series that features characters named Noob Saibot and Cyrax. It's a shame this film introduced an entirely new hero only for him to be this boring. They could've at least named him Kole to keep things consistent.

STORY MODE

Mortal Kombat relies on the usual character beats you expect from an



WHO WORE IT BETTER?

Movie Mortal Kombat warriors vs their classic depictions



KANO

Why is classic Kano wearing a giant seatbelt on his chest?



SONYA

Tank top? Draw. Fighting skills? 2021 Sonya wins this easily.



LIU KANG

Liu Kang feels faithful here, but he better get his headband in the sequel.



RAIDEN

Old Raiden loses on style and intensity, but at least he has his hat.



TOP: Jax, did you forget to use your defroster again?

LEFT: Joe Taslim (left) doesn't get to fully unleash his martial arts skills in MK, sadly.

unlikely hero story: Cole struggles to unleash his true fighting potential until he finally realises that the key all along was his love for his family. (I could've told you that and saved you the training montage, Cole!) That justification is fine, but as with most of its other characters, Mortal Kombat's script is doing only the bare minimum to make its fighters feel like people instead of just glorified stuntmen. In a better action movie, Cole's family would have enough screen time for us to get to know and care about them as people, but here they exist purely as motivation fodder for his journey. Just a couple of hours after watching I'd already forgotten their names.



Still, thin as they are, there's a real pleasure in seeing characters I've known for 20-plus years put on the screen and acted competently, even when what's happening doesn't make much sense. After the first half hour, which eases Cole and other Earthrealm normies Jax, Sonya and Kano into the wider world of Mortal Kombat's magic and monsters, the sketch of a plot pretty much just jumps from one excuse for a fight to the next. I appreciate that it wastes little time, not unlike the story modes of the last few games.

I also appreciate Kano. Kano is the reason I laughed *with* Mortal Kombat more than I laughed at it. Actor Josh Lawson plays up Kano's brash, obnoxious asshole persona so well he

BELOW: Raiden is gruff and rarely speaks, but it's cool seeing him played by a Japanese actor.

makes everyone else look flat by comparison. He keeps the first half of the film fun and breezy in between fight scenes. If you don't enjoy Kano's swagger, you'll at least get a kick out of Mortal Kombat's actors finding moments to drop series lines like "flawless victory" and "get over here!", which are exactly as dumb as you'd expect in a movie that otherwise tries to play it straight.

When the fighting happens, as with the acting, it's competent, but that still ends up being a bit of a letdown. Sub-Zero actor Joe Taslim is one of the stars of The Raid and plays the lead in

the absolutely gruesome The Night Comes For Us, two of the best action movies of the decade. Those movies know how to make their fights feel genuinely dangerous and painful. In The Raid, nobody's head *just* gets slammed into a wall – it gets slammed into a wall once for the knock-out and four more times to be mean. Mortal Kombat may have fatalities like Jax exploding a dude's head, but it never for a moment feels The Raid-level brutal.

COLD COMFORT

Taslim brings an imposing screen presence as Sub-Zero, but it feels like he's held back from being able to do the kind of choreography you see in a great martial arts flick. Too often characters get tossed around instead of killed, or shrug off wounds instead of staggering from them. Here, characters need to pose long enough to show off whatever virtue from the game they're about to pull. The victor in every fight feels preordained, even if they look slick while they're playing out. There's not much tension, in other words, but a nice Hollywood sheen makes the inevitable entertaining.

And at least the movie saves the best for last: the ultimate showdown with Sub-Zero in a glistening icy arena strikes a balance between flashy powers and hand-to-hand combat. Maybe they were just saving most of the lighting for the end.

There are fatalities, and they're fun – though the CG blood sprays and spilled guts look about as cartoony here as they do in the games. For its R rating, Mortal Kombat really could've gone harder. But in the end, I got to watch my boy Kung Lao cut someone in half with his hat and then slide it back on his head, still dripping with gore. By videogame movie standards, I'm calling that a win. ■



Enjoy the
magazine?



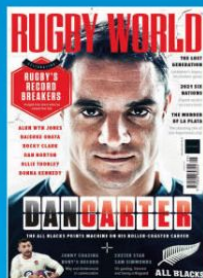
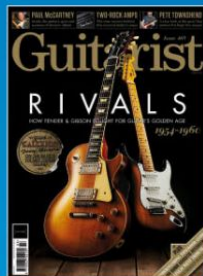
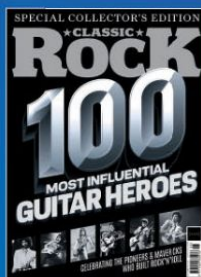
FATHER'S DAY OFFER

Subscribe and get **FREE**
wireless headphones
WORTH £50



INCLUDES

- 20 hours playtime
- Touch sensitive controls
- Bluetooth 5 for maximum stability



— SEE THE FULL RANGE AT —
www.magazinesdirect.com/fday

Or phone 0330 333 1113 and quote code BC16

T&Cs: Offer closes 21.06.2021. Offer open to new subscribers only. Payment is non-refundable after the 14 day cancellation period unless exceptional circumstances apply. Free gift is not available on digital subscriptions. Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Gifts only available to subscribers on the UK mainland. In the unlikely event that we run out of this gift, we promise to offer you an alternative gift of the same or greater value. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please e-mail help@magazinesdirect.com or call 0330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday - Friday 9am-5pm. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.



CUSTOM GAMING

DESKTOPS & LAPTOPS



CUSTOM BUILT
TO YOUR SPEC



EASY TO USE
CONFIGURATOR



CUSTOM PCS
& LAPTOPS



AWARD-WINNING
SYSTEMS



VORTEX XT GAMING DESKTOP

- Intel® Core™ i5-11600KF <
- Gigabyte Z590 UD AC <
- 16GB Corsair VENGEANCE 3000MHz <
- 12GB NVIDIA GEFORCE RTX 3060 <
- 512GB Intel® H10 NVMe SSD + 32GB Optane™ <
- Genuine Windows 10 Home <



This spec from
£1,549.99

IONICO SERIES LAPTOPS

- > 15.6" Matte QHD Screen
- > Intel® Core™ i7 10875H
- > GeForce RTX 3060 / 3070
- > RGB backlit keyboard
- > Genuine Windows 10 Home



This spec from
£1,299.99



FUSION PRO GAMING DESKTOP

- > AMD Ryzen 7 5800X
- > ASUS® TUF X570-PLUS GAMING
- > 16GB Corsair VENGEANCE 3000MHz
- > 16GB AMD RADEON™ RX 6800
- > 512GB PCS PCIe M.2 SSD
- > Genuine Windows 10 Home



This spec from
£1,799.99



GET A FURTHER **£15 OFF**
WITH THIS EXCLUSIVE VOUCHER

PGA21

ORDER ONLINE NOW AT
WWW.PCSPECIALIST.CO.UK

0333 011 7000

*Prices are including VAT and are correct at time of printing, but subject to change. Images are for illustration purposes only, components may differ in aesthetics and brand.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

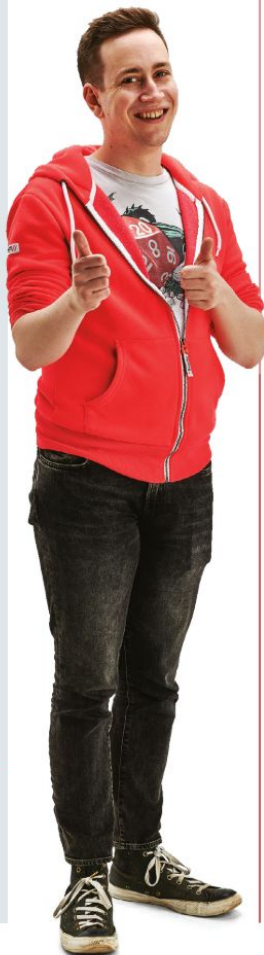
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals. w



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



M'Lady

Few game characters have barrelled into the public consciousness quite like *Resident Evil Village's* Lady Dimitrescu. The ten foot tall, voluptuous vampire blasted out of the cannon of Capcom's marketing machine and hit social media so hard that countless minds, perfectly prepped by months of pandemic-mandated boredom and sexual frustration, simply broke on impact. She truly took on a life (undeath?) of her own – and I'm not sure my Twitter feed will ever truly recover.

Does it matter that, as it turns out, she only features in a brief part of the final game? Just one of many boss encounters, present long enough to tick off some gothic horror boxes before disappearing off backstage. Or was the truly significant game the one played for months before release through memes, fanart and thirsty posts? And will that one ever truly end?

Robin

ROBIN VALENTINE

PRINT EDITOR

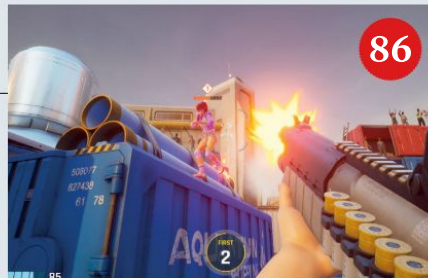
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



72



86



84

Contents

- 72 Resident Evil Village
- 78 Nier Replicant
- 80 Hitchhiker
- 82 Silicon Dreams
- 84 MotoGP 21
- 86 Quantum League
- 88 Smelter

FREE GAMES

- 90 If On a Winter's Night, Four Travelers
- 91 Nojong
- 91 Beasts of Mehetia

THEY'RE BACK

- 92 Sea of Thieves
- 93 Soma
- 93 Abzu
- 93 Song of the Deep
- 93 Megaquarium

This month's running-for-their-lives reviewers...



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Hand reattachment
Currently playing
Resident Evil Village
This month
Resident Evil scared
the pants off him! Or
at least that was his
explanation.



ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
Weird car rides
Currently playing
Hitchhiker
This month
Learned a lot about the
nature of relationships,
and also the nature of
dried grapes.



LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Going loopy
Currently playing
Quantum League
This month
Played a multiplayer
game on a team with
himself. Embarrassing
new lows.



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Corners
Currently playing
MotoGP 21
This month
Stepped in to fulfil his
vital role as the only
reviewer we have who
knows about sports.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Going off the rails
Currently playing
*If On a Winter's Night,
Four Travellers*
This month
Discovered a train
even scarier than the
London Underground.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Poisson dans le vomit
Currently playing
Sea of Thieves
This month
Invented a radical
and daring new fish
recipe that no one
should ever try.



REVIEW

Resident Evil Village



LADY KILLER

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE is a collection of bizarre, beautiful haunted houses, with some of the scariest moments in the entire series. *By Andy Kelly*

Beginning with a scene of domestic bliss, our hero Ethan Winters (returning from *Resident Evil 7*) and his wife Mia prepare dinner and look after their newborn baby, Rosemary. Then something bad happens – I won't say what, because it's pretty shocking – and soon Ethan finds himself lost in an isolated village in a snowstorm, searching for his kidnapped child. It's a sharp, sudden intro, but an effective one, immediately setting the stakes high and establishing *Resident Evil Village's* brutal, sadistic tone.

It's never explicitly stated where the village the game takes its name from is located, but a few clues point towards it being nestled somewhere in the wintry mountains of Romania.

The village itself is a scrappy, ramshackle scattering of wood and brick houses, farmer's fields, and the occasional church. Over it looms a gothic castle with immense spires, and there are also traces of ancient ruins, suggesting a long and strange history. It's a magnificent setting, dripping with atmosphere, menace, and mystery. I wanted to explore every dingy corner of it.

DEAD SET

Ethan is a boring guy who always seems confused about what's going on, and never has anything interesting to say. This makes him a slightly unremarkable protagonist, but his extreme normality does heighten the eccentricity of the village's residents. The previous game's Baker family were a relatively grounded bunch of ghouls, but here Capcom has seriously ramped up the monstrosity of its antagonists. As Ethan hunts for Rose, he goes up against an impossibly tall and glamorous vampire, a weird mutant fish-man, a killer porcelain doll, and other assorted weirdos.

What I love about *Resident Evil Village* is that it never settles on being one kind of horror game. Each villain's lair features a very different take on the genre, from breathless, action-packed survival against hordes of enemies, to a more slow-burning,

psychological approach. It's a game overflowing with ideas, constantly inventing clever, surprising new ways to get your heart rate rising and jolt you out of your comfort zone. And it manages to keep this up for pretty much the entire duration of the adventure.

Each section is so wildly different, *Village* almost has the feel of a horror anthology. Admittedly, this can make it feel

inconsistent at times, as if all the parts are flimsily strung together. You often get the sense that Capcom had the ideas for the game's many brilliant set-pieces first, then decided how to connect them all together at the last minute. But it's worth it for the variety this approach offers. You genuinely never know what fresh weirdness the developer is going to throw at you next, and the imaginations of the artists and writers are firing on all cylinders.

This not only makes this the most varied *Resident Evil* to date, but arguably the scariest. One of the best examples of this is the mansion of Donna Benevento, a dollmaker. In her creaking, dusty old house – which is littered with hundreds of eerie, black-eyed dolls in various states of disrepair – you're forced through a series of brilliantly constructed moments of understated, excruciatingly tense horror, culminating in an encounter that might well be the scariest single moment in *Resident Evil* history. I highly recommend playing this section – and the whole game, if possible – with a good pair of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person survival horror game

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
residentevil.com

headphones, because the sound design is extremely good. It creates a real sense of 3D space, and you can identify where enemies and other horrors are lurking based on the sound they make alone.

In another section you're hunted by Lady Dimitrescu, the aforementioned lofty vampire. Her 15th century castle is an opulent labyrinth of ornate, gilded corridors and shadowy drawing rooms, lavishly decorated and softly lit by candles. It's an incredibly atmospheric setting, and the imposing Lady D bearing down on you (crouching to squeeze through doorways that are much too small for her) is thrillingly nerve-wracking. As she pursues, you have to hunt for objects to unlock the main gate, which involves some light puzzling

FREAK SHOW

The village's creepiest residents



THE HAG
An old woman who wanders around the village saying things that may or may not be helpful.



KARL HEISENBERG
An eccentric engineering genius who lives in a factory near the village.



SALVATORE MOREAU
A mutated human who lives in a reservoir. The coat hides the extent of his mutations.



ALCINA DIMITRESCU
This enormous vampire lady drinks blood and lives in Castle Dimitrescu.



URIAS
A bearded giant with a collection of oversized weapons, including a huge spiked mace.



THE DUKE
A strange merchant. He knows a lot about the village, its history, and its twisted rulers.

Resident Evil Village

✱ and, in true *Resi* style, mentally mapping the building.

X FACTOR

Lady Dimitrescu isn't quite as terrifying as Mr X (the big guy with the hat) from the *Resident Evil 2* remake. While he was eerily silent at all times, Lady Dimitrescu loudly taunts you as she follows you around, which makes locating her easier. And the clink of her heels on the polished floors of the castle, while menacing enough, never filled me with quite as much dread as the wall-shaking thud of the Tyrant's footsteps. She's more of a character than him, and has some interesting backstory to uncover, but I never truly found her scary. The villains in *Village* are more exaggerated and moustache-twirling than *RE7*'s Baker family, who were just deeply horrible.

Castle Dimitrescu is perhaps the best showcase of *Resident Evil*'s impressive visuals – but the entire game is just obscenely pretty. The environments are richly detailed and stunningly lit, with a tangible layer of grime and texture to every object and surface. It runs smoothly, even at high resolutions, and raytracing makes for some gorgeous lighting and reflections. The character models are also spectacular, with expressive, convincing animation bringing the cast horribly to life. The English voice acting is a little hammy, but for the most part this suits these absurd, egomaniacal characters.

The castle and dollmaker's mansion are among the series' most memorable set-pieces. But I do wish they had squeezed more out of some of them. In one sense, I do appreciate how Capcom resists the urge to milk its ideas dry, enthusiastically tossing them aside to present something new to the player. This keeps things feeling fresh and unpredictable throughout. But occasionally I'd reach the end of one of these sequences and think "Is that it?". Sometimes I just wish the game would give me more time to soak it all in before shoving me through to the next room of the haunted house.

Elsewhere, the horror is more immediate. While *Resident Evil 7* had one type of regular enemy – the sludge-like Molded – *Village* features an array of savage horrors called

Lycans. These feral, snarling creatures come in various forms, and you have to regularly switch up your tactics to fight them. The standard grunt Lyan isn't overly powerful, but they're agile and athletic, able to leap at you suddenly from a distance and clamber up walls and ladders, which makes for some entertainingly dramatic, fast-paced battles.

FURRY FRIENDS

I found the regular Lycans too cartoonishly werewolf-like to really be scared by them, but later iterations are much more intimidating. There are some really messed up creatures in the latter half of *Village*, including twitching biomechanical horrors with drills for

arms, guys with chunks of rusty metal screwed to them as makeshift armour, and other similarly grim examples of Clive Barker-esque body horror. It makes those sentient blobs of black slime from *Resident*

Evil 7 seem very lame in comparison.

While much of *Village* takes place in tight, narrow spaces, it sometimes opens up into larger arenas built with combat in mind. Here you'll find plenty of explosive barrels to lure groups of enemies towards, roofs to climb, houses to slip into, and furniture to drag across doorways to stem the flow of Lycans. These sections are enjoyably frantic, but are less interesting than the moments when you don't have to fire your weapon much, or at all. *Village* is a decent first-person shooter, but whenever Capcom focuses on atmosphere and tension over action, it's a much better game.

However, the developer seems to have almost entirely lost interest in

puzzles. There are a few in *Village*, but they're extremely easy, with solutions that are always staring you right in the face. As someone who has always enjoyed the arcane, convoluted puzzles in *Resident Evil* games, I find this slightly disappointing. It does make for a pacier game, with fewer interruptions to the flow of exploration and combat. But I like those interruptions, and I feel like *Village* could have benefited from being a little more cerebrally taxing. I didn't get stuck at all in the 11 hours it took me to finish it.

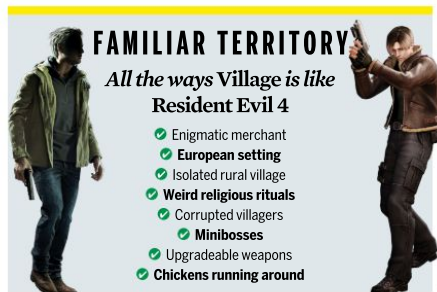
I only died a handful of times too, which was surprising. There are some tricky battles, but the game is good at making you feel like you've scraped through them within an inch of your life. There's always just enough ammunition scattered around to muddle through the tougher fights, which may be evidence of some kind of dynamic difficulty system at play. If there is one, it hides it well. *Village* is pretty much perfectly paced, giving you ample space to explore and organise yourself before tossing you into the next chaotic action set-piece. And I never got bored. Not once.

NOBLE INTENTIONS

Ethan has very few allies in the village, and they tend to die horribly not long after meeting him. But a mysterious character known as The Duke is a constant friendly presence. He's a merchant with a curiously enigmatic personality, and always seems to be one step ahead of you. Turn a corner in a new area and you'll find him there, quietly puffing on a cigar, eagerly awaiting your coin. He sells weapons, ammo, crafting blueprints and other helpful stuff, and will buy any treasure you happen to pick up – including the crystallised remains of bosses, which always fetch a tidy price.

If you're a completionist, then you'll appreciate how the map works. If a room you're in still has treasure or other secrets left to find in it, it'll be marked red on the map. Find everything and it turns blue. It's a nice way to make sure you've scavenged every useful item before you move on – which is important when every bullet counts. You can craft ammo and health items too, which feels a bit tacked-on and that it's just included for the sake of it. But you will be doing it a lot, frequently snapping into the crafting

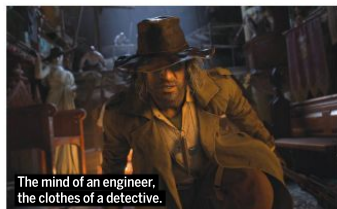
There are some really messed up creatures in *Village*



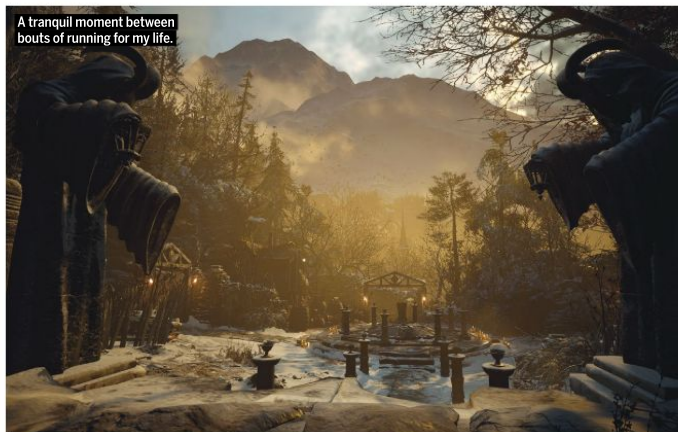
If in doubt, just bolt a bunch of scrap to a monster.



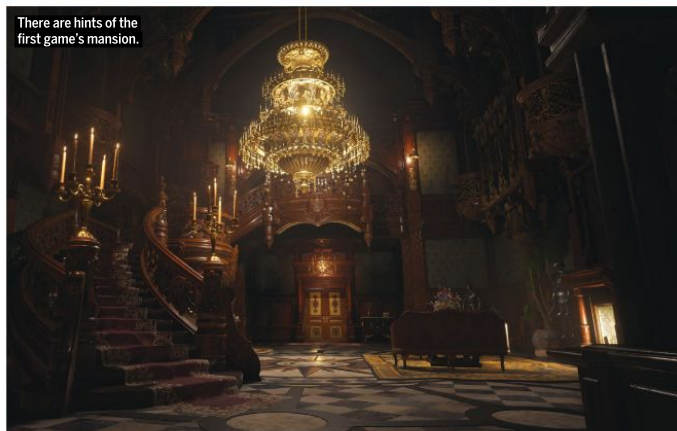
The mind of an engineer,
the clothes of a detective.



A tranquil moment between
bouts of running for my life.



There are hints of the
first game's mansion.



Wrap up warm, Ethan – you'll
catch your death out here.



There are far less weird
puzzles this time round.



Chris Redfield has more depth and nuance than ever before.



Would it kill you to put up some new wallpaper?



Is that a warning? Because I'm going to ignore it.



The environments are wonderfully gothic.



Look, it's the tall vampire lady from the internet.

✱ menu mid-battle to top up your bullet supply or brew up a fresh bottle of healing fluid.

The Duke can also upgrade weapons and turn raw ingredients into meals that permanently increase your health, defence, and movement speed. As you explore the village you'll encounter a range of wildlife including pigs, sheep, chickens, and the occasional fish splashing around in a stream. Shoot them and they'll drop meat, which The Duke can then use to whip up one of these tasty stat-boosting feasts. This is one of several optional quests and distractions, which help *Village* feel slightly less linear than the last game, even if the story does follow a strictly prescribed path.

Running into The Duke gives me the same feeling of relief I get when I find a safe room in the old *Resident Evil* games. It's a chance to breathe, regroup, tidy up your cluttered inventory, and save at the nearby typewriter. Yes, typewriters are back, but you don't need ink ribbons to use them. Inventory management is an important consideration in *Village*, but limited to weapons, ammunition, and health items. There are no magic item boxes in this game, so if a weapon or some other bulky object is taking up too much space, you'll either have to sell it or pay to increase the size of your inventory.

Important items like door keys and objects needed to solve puzzles don't take up any inventory space, and are stored in a separate, bottomless menu – which is one major way *Village* streamlines the classic *Resident Evil* formula. Treasure doesn't take up any inventory space either, so you can carry around as many crystal skulls as you like. I must admit, I miss the old system, where picking up a key might mean sacrificing a weapon or some other helpful item. But it does mean less time spent in menus or backtracking to find item boxes, which, again, increases the overall pace of the game.

Compared to *RE7*, *Village* has a much more interesting structure. A large, open square in the centre of the village acts as a hub, from which all the major locations in the game branch off, locked by a series of keys. This is a safe zone, similar to the main hall of *RE2*'s police station, and

FLAVOUR TOWN *The Duke's tastiest stat-boosting recipes*



BIRD AND BEAST PILAF

Meat and poultry cooked with rice and stock. Eat this dish and the damage you take while guarding enemy attacks is reduced.



TOCHITURA DE PUI

A savoury stew made from the meat of a rare bird, which lives somewhere in the village. Gives you a large permanent HP increase.



SARMALE DE PESTE

Cabbage roll stuffed with fish. The Duke says they're "so light you'll feel weightless", which gives you a permanent movement speed boost.

you revisit it frequently. Here you get easy access to The Duke, as well as the entrances to each villain's lair. The village also hides several optional areas, which contain extra story details, rare treasure, and even minibosses. This rewards you for taking the time to wander off the beaten path and explore.

Although *Resident Evil 7* had the feel of a soft reboot, only lightly touching on the series' larger mythology, *Village* contains some major revelations that impact every game in the series in hindsight. If you're a fan of these stories and you feel like the last few games have been

light on new information about this universe and characters, *Village* will not disappoint. But the important thing is that it's not one of those *Resi* sequels that bombards you with dumb new lore. These

revelations are big and important, but sit quietly in the background, letting Ethan's story stand on its own.

REDFIELD OF DREAMS

One of the biggest surprises in the game is Chris Redfield, who has, of course, been a part of the series since the very beginning. *Resident Evil* characters have always felt like cardboard cut-outs to me. They're more like sentient costumes than people. But in *Village*, in which Redfield plays an important role, he feels, for the first time, like a proper, nuanced, flawed character. He's exactly as cynical, angry and exhausted as a guy who's spent his entire adult life fighting bioweapons should be. I'd love to see more of the *Resi* cast fleshed out in this way.



Finishing the story unlocks a store where you can purchase a selection of extras with an in-game currency earned by unlocking achievements. These include a return of The Mercenaries, a fan favourite arcade/time attack mode. In *Village*'s take on it, you can buy items and weapons from The Duke between rounds. But otherwise it remains faithful to the mode popularised by *Resi 4*. There's a New Game+ mode too, which lets you carry your weapons and upgrades over to a second, harder run. It's also worth spending a few points on figures for the 3D model viewer, because it really highlights just how incredible the character models are in this game.

Village can occasionally feel like half a dozen different horror games jammed together. But the strength and variety of its ideas, the quality of the art direction and its darkly evocative atmosphere more than make up for it. It's a bold and experimental horror game, but also one that leans into the series' past glories – particularly *Resident Evil 4*. There's a lot of Mikami's 2005 reinvention here, from the enigmatic merchant and weapon upgrades to the rural setting and corrupted villagers. But ultimately, *Village* is its own game with its own identity, and the elements it borrows from earlier sequels never define it.

This is a quality horror game in its own right, and proof *Resident Evil* still has the power to thrill, surprise, and scare 25 years on. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A grimly beautiful collection of killer horror set-pieces, with the most memorably grotesque enemies in *Resi* history.

85

NIER AT HAND

NIER REPLICANT is a welcome second chance for a singular action-RPG. *By Julie Muncy*

If you didn't know that *Nier* was the final game from studio Cavia Games, you might be able to tell from playing it. The action RPG feels like a final act: a swing for the fences characterised by anger, tragedy, and a desperate sense of sincerity. And like most desperate swings, it failed at the time: sales were poor, Cavia Games was absorbed into its parent company, and *Nier's* creative director, Yoko Taro, moved on to ply his craft elsewhere.

If *Nier* was characterised by desperation, *Nier Replicant* (technically named *Nier Replicant ver.1.22474487139...* but that's just silly) is an act of love. Created by developer Toylogic and publisher Square Enix with the direct involvement of Taro and his regular band of collaborators, this remaster feels like an attempt to make good on the ideas and promises of that original game. After its sequel *Nier Automata* became an unlikely hit in 2017, the time is betting that now is the right time to reintroduce broader audiences to the charms of the original game. Maybe this time they'll be more receptive.

I honestly don't know if they will: even in its remastered form, *Nier* remains a singular and at times tedious game, a piece of art eager to try *everything* and constantly seeking out the hardest notes to hit. But it's one of the most memorable games I've played, and the remaster ups its greatness in just about every way.

If you come into *Nier* expecting a direct prequel to *Automata's*

cyberpunk-and-thigh-highs existentialist action, you're going to be disappointed. Taking place literally thousands of years before that story, it's set in a post-apocalypse that's swung right back around to pastoral

The combat is significantly more dynamic and fluid than in the original

fantasy, following a boy and his sister in a world of magic diseases, monsters, and at least one talking book. As that boy, you'll be questing around a dark fantasy world while trying to cure your sister of a terrible disease, joining up with some of the best outcasts in gaming: Grimoire Weiss, the book; Kainé, a half-monster warrior woman who casually drops words like 'shitpurse' into combat dialogue; and Emil, the sweetest little boy you've ever met who also happens to have terrifying magic abilities.

The game plays out like a sort of dark pastiche of standard fantasy adventure games like *The Legend of Zelda*, delighting in videogame conventions while also subverting them and turning to deeper thematic territory, meditating on violence, human cruelty, and what it means to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A full remaster of a beloved and strange action JRPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
In-house, Toylogic Inc

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7-8750H, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
nier.square-enix-games.com/en-us

persist in a world that wants you dead and is probably dying itself.

NIER ENOUGH

You'll be spending most of your time running around lush fields and dank dungeons, doing quests and fighting ethereal monsters called Shades. Taking after *Automata*, the combat is significantly more dynamic and fluid than it was in the original, with combos and dodges that feel graceful and responsive. Magic, once clunky and slow to use, is now integrated neatly into combat. Parts of the game that were obtuse before are more clearly explained, like a notorious fishing minigame that now is less of a roadblock. *Nier's* genre shifts pop more, too, now that the core combat mechanics are so much more fun.

The graphics are more advanced now, not quite cutting-edge but at least on par with *Automata*. And many of the visual touches that were key to the original *Nier* are recreated in a more advanced fashion.

There's new material here, too, a smattering of new quests and story beats that don't change the narrative so much as they deepen it.

Ultimately though this is still *Nier*. Like the original, it relies on repetition, layering narrative over multiple playthroughs, which is inventive, but also tiresome in later stages. Like the original game, it has never even heard of subtlety. But like the original, it's also heartfelt.

I don't know how people are going to respond to *Nier* in 2021, even with all the new bells and whistles. It's far from perfect. But I'm telling you: it's worth it. The original is one of my favourite games ever made, and the remaster improves it. *Nier* is special. This is a new chance to try it out. I think you should take it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A tribute to a cult classic, *Nier Replicant* is a fabulous remaster that retains what made the original special.

90

IT'S COMPLICATED Making sense of the Drakengard-Nier timeline

DRAKENGARD 3

Yes, this one is first. It's a prequel.

DRAKENGARD

Continues in *Drakengard* 3's world with dragons, monsters, and gods.

NIER (REPLICANT AND GESTALT)

One of *Drakengard's* endings warps you to modern-day Tokyo. This is where the *Nier* games take place.

NIER AUTOMATA

Then, thousands of years after *Nier Replicant/Gestalt*, we've got this one. It's about robots now. Also aliens, for some unknown reason.

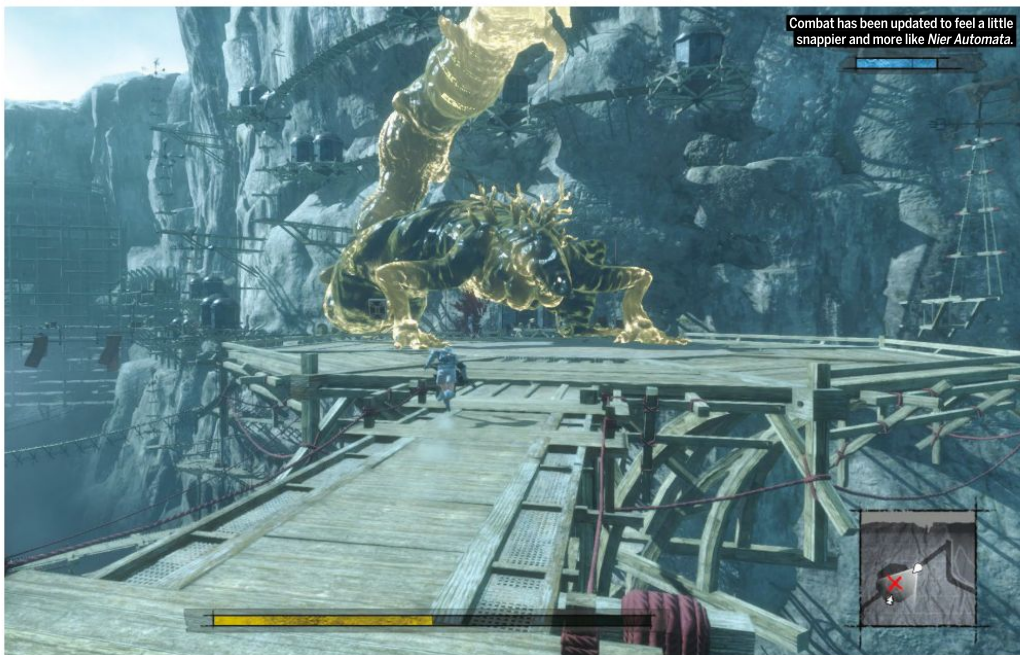
DRAKENGARD 2

A direct sequel to the first game, continuing from another one of *Drakengard's* endings. A bit rubbish, is never mentioned again.

Western audiences originally got an old dad as *Nier*'s protagonist – *Replicant* features the original Japanese hero.



Combat has been updated to feel a little snappier and more like *Nier Automata*.



Genre-bending sequences include a top-down dungeon crawl.

ROAD TRIPPIN'

Strap in for a surreal ride across the American midwest
in **HITCHHIKER**. By Robert Zak

I'm strapped into the passenger seat of a car somewhere in the American midwest. I don't know how I got here, just like I don't know how I'll end up alongside the next four drivers I hitch a ride with in *Hitchhiker*. In an even vaguely real-world context, this scenario could be a little alarming, given how vulnerable I am as an amnesiac hitchhiker with no sense of direction.

But as soon my driver, a raisin farmer called Vern, starts musing about everything from relationships to philosophical raisin-based analogies, a wave of comfort washes over me and I'm all aboard for the ride – wherever it may take me.

Why our protagonist is hitchhiking across America will eventually become clear (sort of). But while I'm riding shotgun with this procession of philosopher-drivers ruminating about everything from relationships to ageing, to the strange world that exists beneath shopping mall escalators, the protagonist's own story about his relationship troubles takes a backseat.

It doesn't take long for you to realise that these roads you're traversing – set across iconic American locales like the Utah desert and American suburbia – are perhaps more figurative than literal. Tumbleweeds with eyes stalk you, an invisible dog runs through the suburban streets, and green fireflies guide you to take photos that start

filling in your character's backstory – the reason you're on this dreamy yet eerie journey in the first place.

The reason, it transpires, is your character's crumbling long-term relationship, which is tarnished by guilt, jealousy and the painful

question of when to let go. You only get glimpses of the relationship itself through flashbacks, photos, and the testimony of the characters you meet, but really the purpose of this entire odyssey

across America is to face up to deep-buried truths our wayfaring hero knows about his relationship but is struggling to face up to.

Even by the standards of a narrative-driven game, *Hitchhiker* is largely non-interactive beyond looking around, dialogue choices, and the occasional light puzzle. And that's fine, because the writing is strong enough to carry player-passengers like me through its modest length, especially as each ride is broken up by a beautiful vignette illustrating a story that a given driver tells – from a black-and-white chalkboard tale

You only get glimpses of the relationship itself through flashbacks

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A surreal narrative-driven game following a hitchhiker

EXPECT TO PAY

£11

DEVELOPER

Mad About Pandas

PUBLISHER

Versus Evilz

REVIEWED ON

Ryzen 7 5800H,
Nvidia GeForce 3080,
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

hitchhiker-game.com

about a man waiting for years to go through a gate, to a vibrant cartoon about a city built of rubber.

ROAD ISLANDS

It's strange, surrealist stuff, but the imagery and writing bind it together in a way that makes it feel warm and hypnotic rather than obscure and aloof. At one point, Leah, the third driver, sums up the protagonist's relationship as "one year of falling in love and four of breaking apart" – a brutal but grounded and all-too-relatable stab of reality.

But for a game where your main form of interaction is binary dialogue choices, and one that is ostensibly about facing up to hard truths, *HitchHiker* doesn't imbue your choices with enough meaning.

Late in the game, my blood ran cold with regret when I believed I'd made the wrong decision in the spur of the moment. But when I replayed the scene after I completed the game, I found that there was only one possible outcome all along. It undercut the illusion built throughout the game that my choices in some way shaped this journey.

It's a shame that such a narrative-focused game doesn't use branching dialogue, player agency in the story, multiple endings, and other well-established tools that make videogames such a powerful storytelling medium.

So *HitchHiker* was a bittersweet experience in the end, not quite fulfilling the themes its characters did such a great job in conveying. It has, however, stuck with me, filling me with thoughts that go beyond the game and into real life: what is the key to happiness in a life shared with someone, and is the answer maybe hidden in a box of raisins? ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Hitchhiker A Mystery Game is a wonderfully written game, but one where you're never in the driving seat.

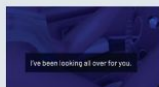
79

BUG OR INTENTIONAL?

It's full of surreal imagery, but also a few bugs. Can you tell them apart?



1 A ceiling fan duplicating and slowly floating down from the ceiling.



2 A character incessantly repeating their last line of dialogue.



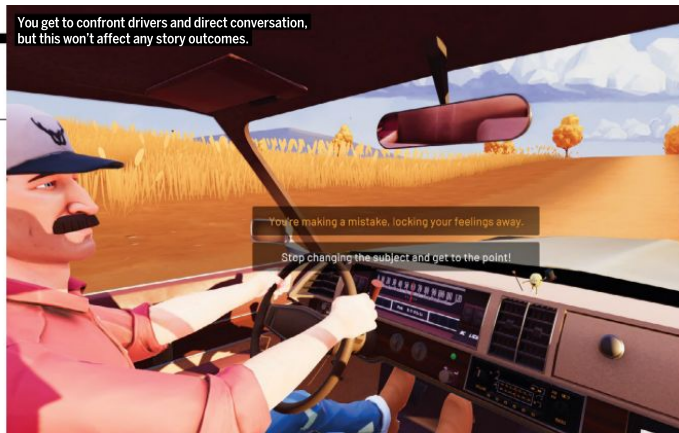
3 Distant objects in the landscape popping in and out of existence.



4 One character's voice suddenly switching to another character's.

Answers: 1,2 & 4 – intentional, 3 – bug

You get to confront drivers and direct conversation, but this won't affect any story outcomes.



The hitchhiker's crumbling relationship is at the heart of his journey.



There are a few puzzles, but they're mostly to keep your fingers busy.

Each character will enrich you with musings about life and the universe.



Two dreamers who had the conviction that their unique consciousness is not the only thing at the center of the universe.

CIRCUIT BREAKER

SILICON DREAMS asks, are you feeling lucky, cyberpunk? *By Luke Kemp*

Although Blade Runner has inspired three trillion and six movies, games, books, comics, albums, and cereals, only a tiny percentage of these have understood (or even *tried* to understand) the film. Throwing neon signs and Japanese words around your environment like a baby gleefully hurling porridge across the kitchen has nothing to do with cyberpunk. Here, however, we have a game that not only *understands* Blade Runner, but thoroughly deserves to be mentioned alongside it. Y'know, like I just did.

Your character is an android created with the sole purpose of running what is for legal reasons absolutely not a Voight-Kampff machine. The game (mostly) consists of a half dozen or so interrogations conducted with this machine. Usually you'll be speaking with androids, but occasionally with a human. You see, while you *will* at one point be tasked with

determining whether somebody is human or android, the experience for the most part takes sharp turns into territory you'll never see coming.

With no voice acting and relatively simple graphics, there is enormous pressure on the script. The writing is incredible, some of the best I've come across in a game in years. Somewhat ironically, each and every android that I meet seems more human than most of the other countless characters I've met in other games.

The depth and texture afforded to the interview subjects is not only impressive, it is incredibly important to the experience. I'm being pulled in several directions at once. Every

interview has an accompanying report to be filled in and, for androids, one of three choices must be made: release, send for maintenance (which guarantees a memory wipe), or destroy. Yet things are not nearly as

simple as they may appear.

As an android myself, I am expected to toe the company line at all times. It's made clear that any attempt to defy my employers, or provision of information that contradicts their expectations (intentionally or otherwise), will immediately cast suspicion on me. I am assessed for my performance after every interview. If my rating falls too low, I will be destroyed and replaced. That's automation for you.

The writing is incredible, some of the best I've come across

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game that makes Blade Runner's desk work pretty intense

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
James Patton, Clockwork Bird

PUBLISHER
Clockwork Bird

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650,
AMD Ryzen 5 3550H,
8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
clockworkbird.net/
games

DOUBLE DECKARD

The interrogation machine that you use displays the emotions that accompany the answers of interviewees, exposing lies and confirming truths. Certain androids are also supposed to have certain emotions limited or disabled, and the company expects you to report any such deviations. Ingratiate yourself with the company enough and you even unlock the ability to slowly induce an emotion of your choice.

During one interrogation, I'm told that in order to get a truthful answer to an important question, I'll need to induce fear in the subject. Hating myself for doing so, but considering it necessary, I lock down the shackles in the interview chair. The interviewee immediately becomes surprised and distressed and, well, it achieves the desired effect.

Most conversations twist and turn into unexpected alleys, and throw me into a variety of emotional corners. One android I eventually decided to trash but felt terrible about it; another, I sympathised with to the point where I decided that a memory wipe was the best option, and I felt saddened when the company destroyed him anyway.

While the writing consistently displays impressive subtlety and enormous intelligence, at one point providing a strong analogy for the life of some sectors of the working class. I have mixed feelings about the first ending I got which, while providing meaningful summaries of the fates of my interviewees, provided an epilogue for myself which didn't lead on quite so smoothly from my final actions. Nonetheless, it's an experience that will stay with me for some time, and one that I know I'll be going back to. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

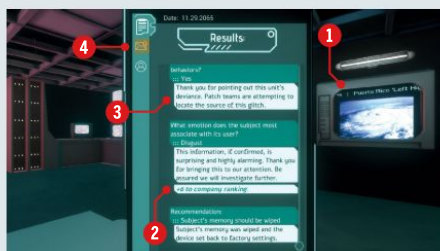
Silicon Dreams is an extremely intelligent sci-fi interrogation sim that's unpredictable for all the right reasons.

89

MY NAUGHTY REPORT *What do the bosses think?*

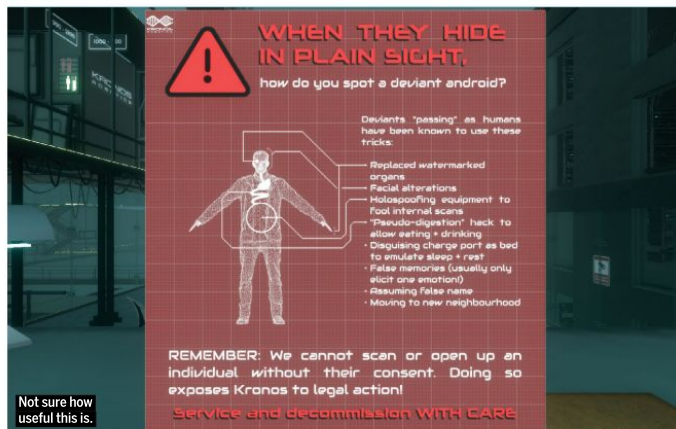
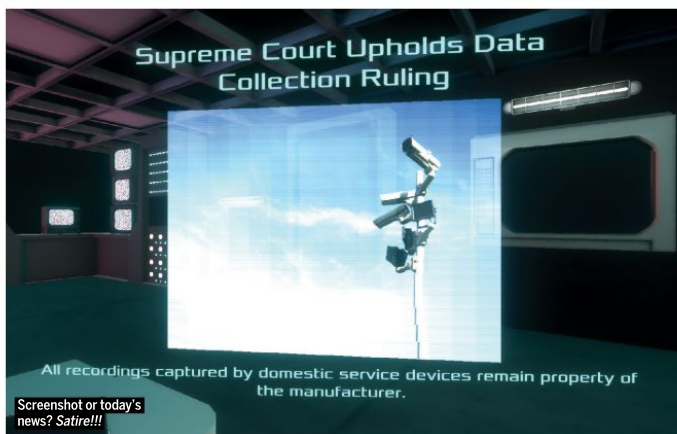
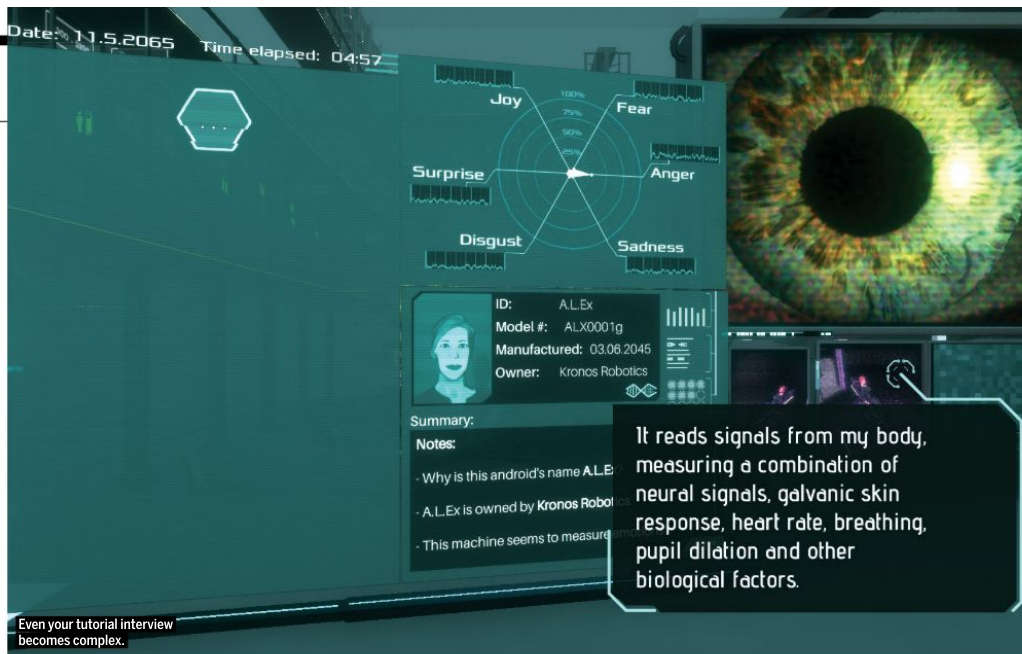
1 The TV in your quarters. Used for darkly satirical news.

2 Most of your answers will see you earn or lose points according to company goals and expectations.



3 The company responds to each answer individually, often hinting at the consequences of your decision.

4 A new message. Your final score... and maybe a stern warning.



SCRAPING BY

Despite technical wobbles, **MOTOGP 21** justifies another annual release. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Are you new to motorcycle racing games? Well let me tell you this: *MotoGP 21* is going to be really difficult. But what am I saying – perhaps you're a perennial hundred-hour player in Milestone's long-running bike sim, with every braking zone from Losail turn 1 to Valencia's Adrian Campos corner memorised. Guess what: *MotoGP 2* is still going to be really difficult.

This series has taken a turn sideways since its move to UnrealEngine in 2018, but this year's release represents the most noticeable shift in difficulty and realism in years. In particular, changes to suspension and braking make themselves felt in every corner entry and apex, demanding a different approach than last year's game asked of you. And if you didn't play any of last year's game: oh boy...

But let's zoom out a bit, because being a modern licensed racing title, there are depths to plumb here that extend way beyond the MotoGP licence and its associated circuits. The main course Milestone offers you is a career mode in which your custom rider graduates from Moto3 through Moto2 and finally to the big leagues – or just picks a ride in the fastest category as a rookie, your call.

In any event, you're given RPG-like levels of control over your team, earning upgrade points by ticking off objectives in practice sessions and then spending them on

bike development. This time you're even assigning specific members of staff to each upgrade project based on their specialisms.

All that inter-team tweaking can be rewarding over the long term, particularly if you take *MotoGP 21* up on its offer to run a completely new team from scratch. There's not enough here to prevent annualised release fatigue, though.

The frustration is real, then, but the rewards are plentiful

ON YOUR BIKE

That's where the on-track changes come

in. However good you were at *MotoGP 20*, you're going to have to completely revise your braking technique here, because the physics changes have a profound effect in those few hundred metres before the apex. It's controller-smashingly easy to apply too much front brake pressure and tip your weight too far forwards, ending up in either a stoppie or a lock-up that sends you sailing past the racing line.

The feeling and timing of shifting your rider's weight from one side of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A racing sim carrying the official MotoGP licence

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Milestone Interactive

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

i7 9700K, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

bit.ly/2Rk0OCs

the bike to the other is slower, more precarious and more believable now, too. And with those two new facets of the handling are combined, *MotoGP 21* asks you to think one turn ahead, in a very real sense.

The frustration is real, then, but the rewards are plentiful. For anyone who cared about realism in the pre-Unreal Engine *MotoGP*s, the ability to constantly tweak your speed and trajectory with taps of the brake or throttle were an immersion killer. The last few games have been working up to a handling model which demands you pick a line and either stick with it or upset your bike, and this year Milestone achieves it.

But there's trouble in this paradise of two-wheeled poise and balletic gliding from apex to apex. That trouble takes its most noticeable form in the AI riders, who employ some very odd tactics including: constantly wiggling very slightly from side to side on straights, crashing 90% of the time in a particular turn at Assen, and never taking a long lap penalty. They also reset to the track straight after crashing, so if you have the new bike recovery mechanic enabled, you'll spend ten seconds running your rider over to his bike and picking it back up while any other fallers are already three turns up the road.

Something's changed in the lighting, too, which makes this year's game appear flatter and duller than the last, while the tyre spray from wet races has a distracting flicker.

You should buy *MotoGP 21* anyway, though, if you have even a sliver of interest in the exploits of Quartararo, Mir, Vinales, Rossi, and the gang. Its meaty career mode can hold you for months, and the uncompromising handling model holds a fascination all of its own. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Milestone's latest *MotoGP* is wobbly and unstable in all the right ways, and some of the wrong ones too.

71

MOTO IMMORTALS *Four legends from MotoGP 21's retro rider content*



MICK DOOHAN
1999 HONDA

Quick Mick dominated the late-1990s on his Repsol Honda before injuries forced him to pull up the stumps.



VALENTINO ROSSI
2001 HONDA

The Doctor. The GOAT. Valentino goes by many names, but his legend was forged on this maiden title-winning Honda.



CASEY STONER
2007 DUCATI

He came, he saw, he conquered, he sacked off at age 27. The Aussie was never better than when riding this Ducati.



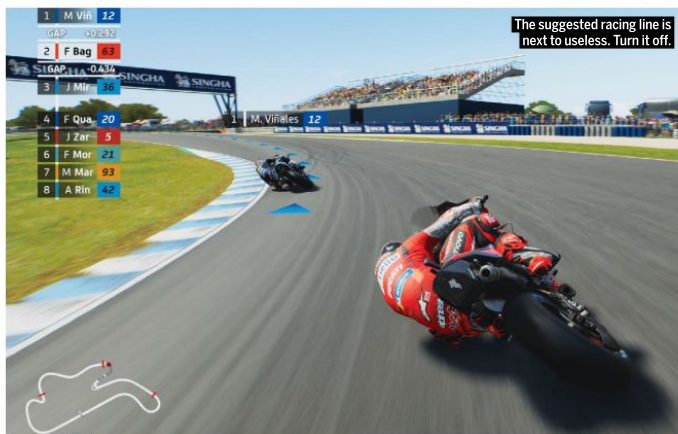
KEVIN SCHWANTZ
1993 SUZUKI

Unfortunately the wins dried up for Suzuki after Schwantz's championship on the now iconic Lucky Strike bike.

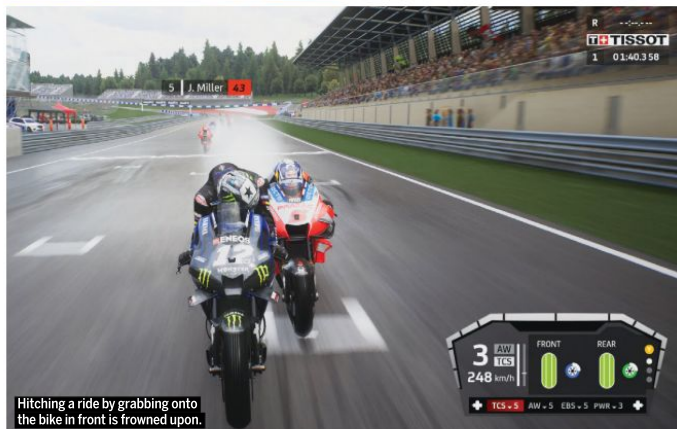
Tarmac textures: pretty, but not worth risking your life to examine.



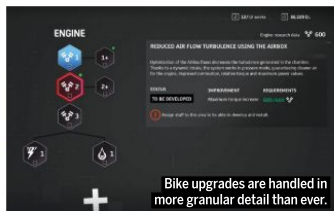
Presentation is often spookily similar to Codemasters' F1 series.



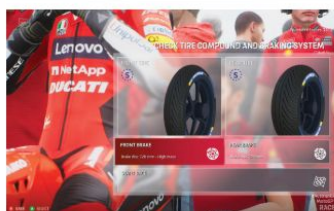
The suggested racing line is next to useless. Turn it off.



Hitching a ride by grabbing onto the bike in front is frowned upon.



Bike upgrades are handled in more granular detail than ever.



HELP YOURSELF

Time travel meets FPS combat
in **QUANTUM LEAGUE**. By Luke Kemp

Having spent several days agonising over how best to explain the complex premise of *Quantum League*, I've decided that the best course of action is to (partly) lie. So, I'm going to tell you that this is a competitive 1v1 or 2v2 FPS consisting of three-round matches. At the end of the first round, you travel back in time to fight alongside yourself for the second round; then time rewinds once more, so that you're fighting alongside two previous versions of yourself.

Let me give you an example. I'm playing a 1v1 point-capture match. In the last seconds, my opponent and I are both on the point, but they kill me just as time runs out. Time rewinds, the second round begins, and I run ahead of the previous version of myself. My plan is to take out my opponent from the first round before they can kill the version of me a few steps behind. Despite efforts from the second round version of my opponent, I succeed. Time rewinds one final time, and I watch the two previous versions of me run ahead as I cover them with a sniper rifle. Only one of my past selves survives, but they're on the point alone, so I score.

If, like me, you've got a bit of a headache now, let me assure you that it's much easier to understand than it is to explain. Traditional FPS skills remain essential – you need good aim and fast reactions, headshots do more damage, and use of cover is often key to survival – but *Quantum League*, really, sits in a genre all of its own. It's essential to understand this if you want to succeed.

Implementation of the core mechanic has been excellently done. Your past selves are utterly oblivious to your presence – they're essentially recordings – and this is what makes this the only game I've ever played where the inclusion of friendly fire actually makes perfect sense. Stumble in front of one of your clones at the wrong moment, and you could take yourself out with a headshot. Similarly, you might damage or even kill one of your clones in the heat of

the moment and completely ruin your chances. In 2v2 matches, with two 'live' players and four clones per team in the final loop, this can lead to some mistakes that are frustrating and quite hilarious in equal measure.

The inclusion of friendly fire actually makes perfect sense

TIME TO DIE

When I said I was lying in the initial explanation, I was referring to some important omissions. It's not really time

travel of course, and matches last longer than I implied. Crucially, however, I didn't mention the fact that, when you're killed, you carry on

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The only game where you can literally shoot yourself in the foot

EXPECT TO PAY

£7

DEVELOPER

Nimble Giant Entertainment

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

quantum-league.com

playing for the remaining time as a ghost. Although you can grab a health orb to resurrect yourself, it's often better to act as though you never died. If you can save yourself in a subsequent round, then all of your actions as a ghost – hits landed, points occupied – will now count.

Given the innovation and wonderful attention to detail visible throughout the game, it's incredibly frustrating to see some fundamentals fumbled. The default stick sensitivities for a controller are absolutely terrible, putting the onus on the player to calibrate them properly (something I was never able to do to my complete satisfaction). The maps, of which there are currently eight, are a little disappointing. Most are somewhat homogenous visually, Museum being the best by far in terms of assets, character, and topography.

Despite some undeniable rough edges, *Quantum League* does a lot of things right. Perhaps the most exciting thing about it is that, unless you're doing amazingly well or amazingly badly, it's impossible to predict a winner until the end of that third loop. Ambushers can be ambushed, resurrections prevented (grab the health orb before your opponent's clone), and victory snatched from the jaws of defeat with milliseconds to spare. Not many shooters can make you feel clever – sometimes even justifiably – in the way that this one can.

There are some bizarre design decisions – ranked 2v2 can only be initiated with a friend, and not every mode (point capture, domination, deathmatch) is available on every map – but overall, *Quantum League* differentiates itself from other shooters (mostly) in the right ways. ■

LET'S GET (QUANTUM) PHYSICAL

The characters and their abilities



BJARNE

Players with low health are visible through walls.



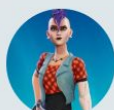
JACKIE

Moves faster while dead. Great for getting health orbs.



JUSTIN

His past selves deal extra damage. Rocks a hoodie.



LEVKA

Can see opponents after they've lost their bodies.



TOURE

Generates a 'kinetic shield' while sprinting.



VIOLET

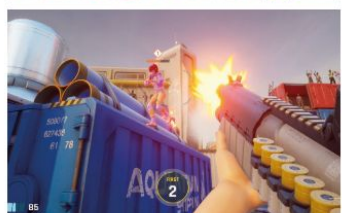
Choose a new weapon during play. It's not very useful.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

All three of me agree, there's nothing quite like *Quantum League* out there. This is definitely worth your time.

71



SMELTING POT

SMELTER combines side-scrolling action levels with a real-time strategy map. *By Eric Watson*

The story of *Smelter* begins with Adam and Eve and the downfall of Eden, and ends with freeing an empress from a crystal prison and racing to stop a megalomaniac demon from taking over what I presume is a section of Hell. It's a side-scrolling action-platformer with a real-time strategy overland map, a tower-defence strategy game and a top-down shoot-'em-up, interweaving multiple indie-friendly genres – and not for its benefit.

The awkward blending of genres is just as weird as the story, which transports Adam and Eve's fall from Paradise into a world of mailbox-shaped monsters, hidden labs, and a flying mask named Smelter. Eve wants to find Adam, while Smelter wants to restore his lost empire of Zirms, who resemble dark elves. He offers to merge with Eve, Venom-style. The result is more battle bikini than super suit, though it does come with lots of fun attacks and abilities, such as electro-whips, blasters and reflector shields.

To unlock and upgrade these abilities, I'll need to conquer the Rumbly Lands – the cheeky term Smelter uses to describe the overland map. For much of the game I control Smelter as he flies around the map, constructing buildings, hiring Zirms, and repelling enemy attacks.

The real-time strategy gameplay isn't exactly *StarCraft*. It's a bare-bones RTS without direct unit management or tech trees. I have

access to four main buildings, but my only real choices are where to place them, which doesn't make much difference if I'm smart enough to put the houses and shrines behind the barracks and outposts.

Gradually I expand my empire, and in each area I'll need to complete objectives that amount to the exact same routine: defending against waves of enemies every single time. The tower-defence strategy provides a nice break in between meaty platforming levels, but repetition stopped me from having fun after the first few hours.

SIDE QUESTS

The side-scrolling levels are fun and interesting as the RTS sections are bland, thanks in large part to varied level designs and the deep skill trees that Eve can swap between to fully explore each area. Dashing behind an enemy, clinging to a wall, and jumping down to unleash a wave of rocks is satisfying in every level,

Bare-bones RTS without direct unit management or tech trees

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
60% pixelated action-platformer, 30% real-time tower-defence strategy, 10% top-down shoot-'em-up

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
X PLUS Company Limited

PUBLISHER
DANGEN Entertainment, Camera Game

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, AMD FX 8350 Eight-Core, Radeon RX 580, 24GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
dangen entertainment.com

and *Smelter* lets you unlock many of the best abilities, like double-jump and wall-jump, almost immediately.

Each region also feels unique, with its own enemies, soundtrack, colour palette, and story. One level features gargantuan screen-clearing sand worms. In a rainy jungle I have to avoid a tide of rising acid-water amidst a labyrinth of corridors. A tech-themed region features walls of electricity and dragons.

To survive these hazards, Eve unlocks three skill trees based on each of the three regions and can cycle through them at the press of a button. Each mode changes Eve's attacks and grants different traversal abilities. The first set has the critical double-jump, as well as hard-hitting claw attacks and a reflective shield. The second gives Eve a mid-range electro-whip with a damage multiplier, and the last unlocks a *Mega Man*-like blaster.

The traversal abilities make exploring every false wall and hidden area fun and rewarding as I hunt for hidden apple cores and trials in each level. Apple cores upgrade my buildings on the strategy layer, while trials earn coins to upgrade my skills.

Smelter is unafraid to get downright nasty towards the end. The final dungeon is a checklist of the most frustrating elements you can experience in a platformer: timed chases, instant kill traps and bosses with multiple forms. Modern checkpoints, including one at the start of each boss fight, prevented me from completely losing my mind.

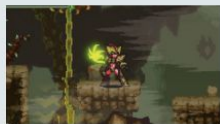
Smelter fails when it's trying to layer a compelling RTS on top of the 2D action-platformer, but most of it is spent in the enjoyable side-scrolling levels – provided you have the skill to survive the endgame. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The RTS layer is limited and repetitive, but the side-scrolling levels are well-designed and challenging.

63

POWER PLAY *The three skill trees that define how you play*



GURABI

- Close-range claws for big hits
- Stone shield to reflect projectiles
- Double jump and wall-grab



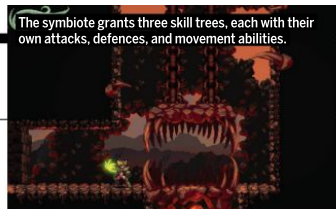
EREMAGU

- Electro whip for mid-range attacks
- Dash-jump to leap chasms
- Short-range teleport



NUTURO

- Weak but rapid-fire blaster
- Majestic wings for limited flight
- Phase out for invulnerability



The symbiote grants three skill trees, each with their own attacks, defences, and movement abilities.



Unlock the next level by occupying laser cannons.





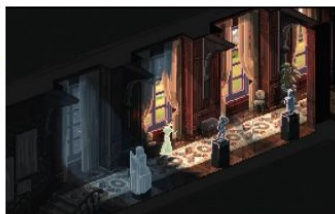
The isometric perspective ensures every scene is full of depth.



Doctor Samuels: Welcome to the Chapel Perilous. I've been waiting for you.



I found the linking train narrative a bit jarring, tonally.



WINTER'S TALES

IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT, FOUR TRAVELERS is an accomplished anthology

In the varied history of horror film, there's a subgenre known as portmanteau or anthology horror, in which short tales of dread are collected and often linked by a running narrative or character. *If on a Winter's Night, Four Travelers* slots neatly into this tradition, as its three protagonists converge on a train setting to tell their dreadful tales of rejection, delusion, and messing with forbidden lore.

The first story, *The Silent Room*, offers a short, sharp shock in a hotel room, as a man named Carlo awaits his lover, Patrick. Like the other stories, it's set in the 1920s: not an especially good time to be gay, particularly when one man is more comfortable with himself than the other. Saying any more would spoil it, as it's over before you know it, but the sudden change of tone was shockingly effective.

The *Slow Vanishing* of *Lady Winterbourne* is an affecting tale of gothic horror, where you play as a laudanum-addicted woman in a neglected mansion. It's here where the fluidly animated pixel art impresses most keenly, as you explore the mansion and – via the laudanum – imbue it with life. *Lady Winterbourne* has only a tentative grip on reality, as evidenced by these moments where

she imagines the place to be drenched in light, the flowers to be in bloom. The transformation happens with an exquisite visual effect.

By itself, *The Slow Vanishing* would be one of the more substantial free adventure games around. There's

no inventory wrangling, but there are several puzzles, and pretty good ones too: just involved enough to make you think, but not enough to send you flailing for a walkthrough. As with many horror shorts,

there's a twist waiting at the end, but it's handled subtly and respectfully. This is a sad story that is sympathetically told.

GHOST TRAIN

The Nameless Ritual is a work of crunchy cosmic horror that nails the Lovecraftian feeling of sticking your toe into an alien, unknowable realm.

It's here where the fluidly animated pixel art impresses most keenly

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A gorgeous point-and-click adventure telling a handful of horror stories

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

Dead Idle Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK
bit.ly/FourTravelers

You play as Jordan Samuels, a black doctor whose life has been made miserable by the racist abuse of his colleagues, and who is dabbling in the occult to redress the balance. You spend the first part of the game inside his dingy flat, before the setting takes a turn to the fantastic.

The standout sequence in this tense, atmospheric story is the flooded library, which has Jordan squelching between partially submerged bookshelves. With its dreamlike imagery and detailed pixel art animation, it's what a Guillermo del Toro film would look like at 320x200 resolution.

As an anthology, as a whole, *Four Travelers* is marred slightly by an insubstantial opening chapter and a linking narrative that ultimately undermines the horror. But *In The Slow Vanishing* of *Lady Winterbourne* and *The Nameless Ritual*, we have two of the most accomplished horror games I've played in ages. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

There are two fantastic – in both senses of the word – tales on offer in this slightly imperfect horror collection.

84

MATCHMAKING

Mahjong meets match-three in **NOJONG**

It took me several plays to fully comprehend *Nojong*, which is a *Columns*-style match-three game, but where matching blocks is only half of the story. In addition to smushing pairs of two or three identical blocks together, as they fall from the top of the screen, you're also trying to build a beautiful hand of cards.

Well, I say cards, but it's actually a hand of nine blocks, initially shuffled from the nine colourful designs: wood, leaves, sun, glass, etc. The blocks in your hand can be swapped for the falling one at any time – for instance, if you need to clear a sun block that's been clogging up the playing field.

The rub, however, is that the falling block will then go into your hand, disrupting your careful pruning with the sudden arrival of, say, some glass or a cube of wood.

In *Nojong*, you earn nominal points for doing the aforementioned *Columns*-style matching, but many more – as well as tasty multipliers – for having an attractive hand of blocks at the end of each round.

Let's say you've got two sets of quadruples in your hand – that's a very generous 1,600 points for each. Now, finagle them so that they're mirroring each other, and with a different block jammed snugly in the middle. Voila, there's now a healthy 2x multiplier to all your points. And that's how you can make sure that you're beating the game.

Arranging a hand can be difficult, as you're also playing a game of *Columns*, which of course gets faster as the rounds go on. But *Nojong* puts a clever new spin on a genre that, for the most part, has not been shaken up too much.

It's a concept that plays beautifully once it clicks. ■

82



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Ben Allen

LINK
bit.ly/3uBJtpg

EYES WIDE SHUT

Fighting volcanic monsters **BEASTS OF MEHETIA**

If you've ever hidden under the covers in fright, perhaps because you're scared there might be a ghost, then you'll sympathise with the plight of the nervous hero of *Beasts of Mehetia*: a child battling monsters in a fiery volcano. His main weapon is his courage, and his main form of defence is, er, closing his eyes. This doesn't make the monsters go away, but it does give him a moment to come to his senses, without them in sight to hinder his recovery.

Courage is a resource you use to battle enemies: one point of courage does one damage, and if you run out, you'll expend precious HP instead. While courage does recover naturally over time, this will only happen if there are no enemies present, or if you press the button to close your eyes, causing the viewing area to shrink and giving monsters the

chance for a surprise attack. It's a novel mechanic that supports the game's coming-of-age-ritual premise, and that makes this turn-based roguelike feel unique.

And there's plenty else to love about *Mehetia*, from the cute pixel art visual style, to the no-messing-about, life-or-death combat. While keeping an eye on your courage, you also have to keep watch on enemies – when flashing red, they'll deal damage if you're standing next to them. Health and courage points are few and far between, as are inventory slots, but that only makes every action feel more meaningful.

Roguelikes often take for granted that their heroes are fearless adventurers, but what if their worst enemy was themselves? It's a fun idea, and *Mehetia* does it a good bit of justice, even if its levels get quite samey after a while. ■

79



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Benjamin Soulé

PUBLISHER
benjamin-soul.itch.io



EYEPATCH NOTES

Sick-simmered fish and financial stress in **SEA OF THIEVES**

Launching a ship is difficult. It imposes stresses on the vessel not experienced during standard operation. It presents a significant, often dangerous engineering challenge. In 1860, after eight years of planning, two people died launching Isambard Kingdom Brunel's SS Great Eastern. It's so difficult, in fact, that sailors do anything they can to bless the maiden voyage, which is why we smash bottles of champagne on the hulls of new ships.

Despite this, I'd still rather launch a 32,000 ton steam ship with salad tongs and half a can of WD40 than try to fire up *Sea of Thieves* on the Microsoft Store again. It simply won't load. I reinstall, switch drives, and even consider breaking a bottle of champagne against my PC. In the end, I move the whole operation over to Steam, which makes my intro about SS Great Eastern much more relevant.

It's worth the faff. I enjoyed *Sea of Thieves* when it first came out and back then there was nothing else to do except collect tiny pigs in wooden cages. These days it feels full of distractions, even if the NPCs are a bit static and rubbery.

After some time spent acclimatising to the new stuff, I set out on a brigantine with two mates and a cat called Stormy Mau. Sailing

still feels great. There's an amazing sense of momentum from navigating the swelling seas, and the game gets the simple, repetitive things right: stuff like filling your sails with wind or the satisfying 'kuh-chonk' of the turning wheel. It's also a more interactive space now. I try to make dinner for the crew and it becomes an episode of Jackass: I catch a fish then accidentally eat some of it raw. I try to cook what's left, but it's too

late: I vomit in the pan before serving it to a crewmate. I'm not eating that because technically, I already have.

Our mission, too, feels more purposeful. We're using a magic compass to piece together map fragments, which eventually leads to a mystical cave full of chests, treasure, and glittering piles of gold. It's a greedy scramble to fill our pockets

We're using a magic compass to piece together map fragments

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The world's greatest hurdy-gurdy simulator

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Rare

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
seaofthieves.com

and transport the booty outside before the door slams shut. It's agonising; suddenly, I empathise with every entombed pirate from '80s action movies. But what comes next is worse: an agonising crawl back to port so we can sell our goods, surrounded by predatory ships. Sure, we could fight; but I just got cooking and eating wrong, so I don't fancy our chances in naval combat.

HOME SAFE

We make it back unscathed, and I make more gold in one evening than I have in years. I promptly spend most of it on fabulous pirate clothes and a thick beard that's perfect for catching sick. I gave up playing *Sea of Thieves* after watching three-hours worth of imprinted pigs sink to the briny depths before dying alone in a sloop that had been struck by lightning. It might be the gold, or the beard, or the companionship that comes from sharing vomit-fish, but it feels like a different game. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

After a bit of a feted launch, *Sea of Thieves* is delicious fun with the right crew. A game where the hours sail past.

88

UNDER PRESSURE

Enjoy a heightened sense of paranoia in **SOMA**

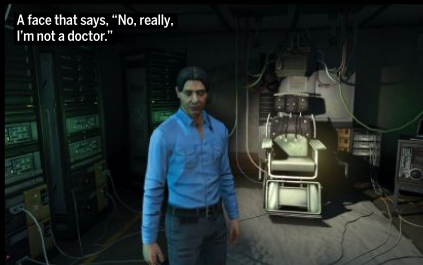
If there's one thing games have taught me, it's never to trust anyone in a lab coat who tells you they're not a doctor. Even, and perhaps especially, if they work on the Clinique counter in Boots.

This is how *SOMA* begins, and the sense of all-pervading wrongness spirals from there. I feel sad going into it with some prior knowledge, because it must have been amazing to experience the first WTF moment cold, trying to piece together what's going on from snippets of garbled information and environmental hints. The world is properly brilliant: the feral child of Rapture and the Sevastopol, literally dripping in horror, framed by menacing shadows. It looks fab, even now, like a real, intimidating place despite the speculative fiction trappings.

The feeling of being in a real place, however strange, is heightened

by how tactile it all is. Levers, doors and handles are all manipulated realistically, and it really helps build the cautious anticipation about what's behind the next sealed door. It's a measure of how good the world is that even some seriously naff voice acting doesn't really damage the experience. Protagonist Simon sounds more like he's lost his phone charger than a man imprisoned in a subaqueous hellscape. I'm also less enamoured by the hide-and-seek horror elements. The first few encounters are terrifying, but it loses its edge after a while. This is where the tweaked difficulty modes come in. It's possible to play it without the threats and still experience the game's twisting story minus the constant spectre of violence. It might suck out the tension, but it's a good way of enjoying the top notch horror storytelling. ■

78



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£23

DEVELOPER
Frictional Games

PUBLISHER
Frictional Games



ABZU

I haven't looked, but I expect there are thousands of ASMR videos about *Abzu*. Calm voices narrating as you paddle past swaying kelp and shoals of brightly-coloured fish. I'm comatose just thinking about it.

It's a testament to *Abzu*'s chill that you can even feel relaxed while riding a shark. The most stirring moments come from the sense of freedom, both in terms of where you go and the lack of a time limit. I also don't mind the story, even if the inevitable ecological message feels like the bit at the end of the nature documentary where Sir David Attenborough makes us feel bad about how we're ruining the ocean and all crabs now live in discarded yoghurt pots. ■

82



SONG OF THE DEEP

Swimming in games is always bad. So why do I quite like *Song of the Deep*, a game that's just one great big underwater level? It's partly to do with presentation. The missing-dad storyline and Irish narration make it feel I've stumbled across a sad Scandinavian animation on Netflix.

I respect protagonist Merryn's engineering skill: if I built a homemade submarine in a day it would essentially be a submersible tomb. And while it's not especially challenging, it's a pleasant experience nonetheless: like going to see the expensive aquariums at the back of the pet shop and accidentally discovering your missing father floating next to the algae scrubbers. ■

68



MEGAQUARIUM

After being endlessly hassled by monster fish in *Song of the Deep*, this feels like revenge. *Megaquarium* is *Prison Architect* for aquatic life. Or at least that's how I'm playing it. I don't care if you don't want to be bullied by the bigger fish, King Demoiselle; you made the mistake of looking like an enemy from my last review. That thought aside, *Megaquarium* is just lovely: a gentle management sim that drip feeds you new options for progression and provides just the right level of complexity. ■

80

IF I HAD SOMEWHERE TO LIVE...

I COULD GO ANYWHERE IN LIFE

When Abi's mum died, life got tough. She didn't get on with her dad and the arguments became violent. Abi felt her only choice was to leave home. With just the clothes on her back, and no idea where to go, she ended up sleeping on the streets in the freezing cold.

Right now, you could give a homeless young person like Abi somewhere to start their future

Abi's life changed when she was given a room at Centrepunkt. A safe place to sleep and recover. A place to develop the skills and confidence she needed to rebuild her life – and leave homelessness behind for good. Now, Abi believes she can go anywhere.

Thousands of homeless young people like Abi are desperately trying to find their place in the world – but first they need a place to start again. **You could help right now by sponsoring a room at Centrepunkt for just 40p a day.**

We know this support changes lives. 88% of the young people we help move on positively in life. So please, help someone like Abi today. **Thank you.**

Text PLACE to 78866 to donate £3

Call free on 0800 472 5798

Visit centrepunkt.org.uk/place

Or complete and return the form below

SPONSOR A ROOM. HELP A HOMELESS YOUNG PERSON FIND THEIR PLACE.

YES, I WANT TO SPONSOR A ROOM FOR £12 A MONTH

Please collect my payment on the 1st/15th of every month (please circle preferred date).

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit	
To the Manager: Name and full address of your Bank or Building Society:	Originator's Identification No. 659107
Postcode _____	
Name(s) of Account Holder(s) _____	
Bank Sort Code:	Account Number:
Instructions to your Bank or Building Society: Please pay Centrepunkt Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction, subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Centrepunkt and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.	
Signature(s) _____	Date _____
Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account.	
Increase your donation by 25p for every £1 you donate with Gift Aid <i>giftaid it</i>	
☐ By ticking this box I confirm I am a UK taxpayer and want Centrepunkt to Gift Aid all donations I've made in the last four years and any donations I make in the future until I notify you otherwise. I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in any tax year than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations it is my responsibility to pay any difference.	
Your name and address are needed to identify you as a current UK taxpayer.	

Full Name: _____
Address: _____
Postcode: _____ Telephone: _____
Email: _____

Thank you for donating to Centrepunkt today.

We'd love to show the impact of your support and share how young people continue to need your help, through newsletters, fundraising appeals and information about events. Please let us know how best to stay in touch with you by adding your details above, and ticking the relevant boxes:

☐ Please contact me by email ☐ Please contact me by phone

Last year our supporters helped us change the lives of over 15,000 homeless young people. By letting us know we can count on you, we can continue helping young people with a home and a future.

Your privacy is key.

We promise never to sell or swap your details, and will always keep them secure. You can view our Privacy Notice in full at www.centrepunkt.org.uk/privacy. You can opt out of post and change how we communicate with you at any time. Please call 0800 232320 and speak to one of our friendly team or email supportercare@centrepunkt.org to do this and ask us any questions.

Please return this form to: Freepost Plus RTXY-LBEA-UTJJ, Angel Fulfillment Services Ltd, Communication Centre, Par Moor Road, Par PL24 2SQ.

Registered office address: Central House, 25 Camperdown Street, London E1 8DZ.
Company no. 1929421. Registered Charity no. 292411. Housing association no. H1869.
VAT registration no. 649 345 018.



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

Finding the best high refresh rate monitors.

100

TECH REPORT

Uncovering Bitcoin's fatal flaw – and how it could be exploited.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Whether you're skint or flush with cash, we have a build for you.





2



GROUP TEST

HIGH REFRESH RATE MONITORS

You don't need to be an esports pro to get the most out of a high refresh monitor.

By Jeremy Laird

Want a gaming monitor? Then get one with a high refresh rate. On that we all agree. Everything else is pretty much up for grabs, and boy are there plenty of features to ponder with the latest gaming panels.

Deciding between an IPS or VA panel is already a conundrum and a half. And what about panel, size, shape and

resolution? Is the 16:9 aspect ratio still the most versatile or is ultrawide the way to go? Oh, and price. The best high refresh rate monitors ain't cheap, unfortunately. But nor are they necessarily megabucks.

If you feel you can't answer any of these questions then don't fret, we're here to help. For we've done the testing, played the games, and made our conclusions in the hope of offering you a firm answer on which high refresh rate monitor is worth your money.



MPG ARTYMIS 343CQR

MSI **£899**

Way ahead of the curve

1 For a while it looked odds-on curved panels would assimilate the whole gaming market. More recently, the popularity of curved LCD monitors seems to have tailed off just a little. Curved HDTVs proved to be a largely passing fad. But with the MPG ARTYMIS 343CQR, MSI has clearly decided that if it's going to keep the faith with curved PC monitors, it's going to absolutely own the issue. This thing has a tight 1000R curve. That means the arc of the panel is such that, when extended full circle, the radius of said circle would be just one metre. This is one seriously

bent screen. Beyond that, critical speeds and feeds include 34-inch ultrawide panel proportions, 3440 x 1440 resolution, 165Hz refresh, 1ms (MPRT) response, and DisplayHDR 400. Underpinning all that is the 343CQR's other eyebrow twicker, beyond the extreme curve, namely VA panel technology. For pure visual spectacle and gaming immersion, no other high refresh rate monitor comes close to the MPG.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- VA panel positively pops
- Extreme curve is seriously immersive
- Excellent brightness and contrast

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 34-INCH / PANEL TYPE: VA / ASPECT RATIO: 21:9 / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 3440 X 1440 / RESPONSE TIME: 1MS (MPRT) / REFRESH RATE: 165HZ / BRIGHTNESS: 550CD/M2

Agon AG273QXP

AOC **£430**

The messiah of monitors? Not quite

2 Why, exactly, does the AOC Agon AG273QXP run at 170Hz refresh? Is it a cynical marketing move designed to give AOC's latest gaming panel a superficial edge over the usual 165Hz suspects? Is there some specific technical reason for the extra 5Hz?

One thing is for sure, there's absolutely no chance of spotting the difference between 165Hz and 170Hz in-game. It's hard enough to reliably pick 165Hz from 144Hz or even 240Hz. An extra 5Hz? No chance.

It's a pity to be distracted by such trivia, because the AOC Agon AG273QXP has loads going

for it. That 170Hz panel is a 1440p IPS item, which makes it something of a Goldilocks model for modern gaming. Not too many pixels. Not too few. But just the right balance between visual detail and frame rate.

To that you can add extras like adaptive sync support in the form of AMD FreeSync Premium Pro and Nvidia G-Sync Compatibility, plus VESA DisplayHDR 400 certification. Rounding it all out is a claimed response time of 1ms.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gorgeous 1440p IPS panel
- Low latency, fast response
- Decent HDR support

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 27-INCH / PANEL TYPE: IPS / ASPECT RATIO: 16:9 / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 2560 X 1440 / RESPONSE TIME: 1MS (GTG) / REFRESH RATE: 170HZ / BRIGHTNESS: 400CD/M2



GROUP TEST

3

Predator XB253QG

ACER £344

The best 240Hz monitor rocks a 0.5ms response

3 1080p not your bag? Better jog on as the Acer Predator XB253QG won't be for you. It isn't really for most of us, either, given 1440p is a better all-round compromise for most gamers from a purely visual point. But if ultra low latency, and frames rates high enough to give you a nosebleed sounds like your thing, this 1080p 25-inch should be on your shortlist.

It's very similar to the Alienware 25, but clocks in at a mere 240Hz to the Alienware's outrageous 360Hz. In truth, only the most demanding esports addicts will be able to tell the

difference. But if you are that sensitive to latency, the Acer's 1080p resolution actually makes sense. After all, the fewer the pixels, the higher your frame rate.

You can tune pixel response through an overdrive setting, but the most aggressive setting introduces some ghosting. But set to medium, this is a very quick IPS monitor. That said, even with a claimed MPRT response time of just 0.5ms this is not an entirely blur-free monitor.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Seriously snappy response
- Very low latency
- Decent IPS image quality

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 25-INCH / PANEL TYPE: IPS / ASPECT RATIO: 16:9 / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 1920 X 1080 / RESPONSE TIME: 0.5MS (MPRT) / REFRESH RATE: 240HZ / BRIGHTNESS: 400CD

25 AW2521H

ALIENWARE £599

Hitting 360Hz is the ultimate flex

4 There's an elephant in this high refresh rate monitor round up. And it's the inevitable question of diminishing returns. When do they kick in? 165Hz? 240Hz? How about 360Hz? Oh yes, this updated Alienware 25 is good for the full 360. In purely experiential and subjective terms, it's not easy to separate it from otherwise similar 1080p IPS monitors that hum along at a comparatively pedestrian 240Hz refresh.

Of course, esports aficionados with ninjascope reflexes will appreciate the difference. And there's certainly no penalty to pay, given this IPS panel. It's not

like you're forced to suffer a dingy TN panel to have all those Hz. As for pixel response, it's about as good as IPS monitors get, though once again hard to really separate from the cheaper 240Hz brigade.

But it's Alienware's other qualities that set it apart. For starters, this is the brightest of the 25-inch bunch. The Nvidia G-Sync chip also makes for a smoother low-frame-rate experience than a mere G-Sync 'Compatible' or FreeSync display.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- The ultimate esports panel
- Punchy image quality
- Excellent latency and response

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 25-INCH / PANEL TYPE: IPS / ASPECT RATIO: 16:9 / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 1920 X 1080 / RESPONSE TIME: 1MS (GTG) / REFRESH RATE: 360HZ / BRIGHTNESS: 400CD



4



5



6

Q&A

How many Hz do you really need?

If you're asking the question, 144Hz is probably plenty. Esports fiends who will really appreciate higher refresh rates already know what they want.

What resolution should you go for?

Even with the latest unobtainable graphics cards, 4K gaming at high triple-digit refresh rates is a stretch in most games.

So, 1440p (at either 16:9 or 21:9 aspect ratio) is probably the better compromise. 1080p is mainly of interest to those who demand the very highest frame rates for shooters.

What about the curve conundrum?

For our money, curved panels make most sense in larger formats and with super-wide 21:9 or wider panels. A curved panel on, say, a smaller 27-inch 16:9 panel isn't necessarily a bad thing. But nor does it really add much to the experience.

Predator XB273K

ACER **£899**

The best 4K high refresh rate panel is gonna cost ya

5 Never mind a new generation of GPUs you can't buy, and consoles in short supply, 4K remains a problematic resolution for gaming. It's just sooo many pixels. Over eight million, in fact. Even at a mere 60Hz, that's 500 million pixels that have to be rendered, rasterised, ray-traced each and every second.

That works out at over a billion per second at 144Hz, which just so happens to be the refresh rate of the Acer Predator XB273K. Compared to the pricier Acer Predator X27, it lacks local dimming, delivers lower peak brightness and is merely G-Sync

'Compatible'. Of course, affordability is relative and the XB273K is still a pretty pricey panel. Indeed, with 120Hz 4K OLED TVs available for not all that much more than this 27-inch monitor, the value proposition isn't exactly compelling.

None of which to say this screen lacks appeal. No, siree. Once you've seen Cyberpunk 2077 running in full IPS-plus-4K glory, you won't want to go back to 1440p, let alone 1080p.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gorgeous 4K IPS image quality
- Good response and latency
- Basic HDR support

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 27-INCH / PANEL TYPE: IPS / ASPECT RATIO: 16:9 / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 3840 X 2160 / RESPONSE TIME: 1MS (GTG) / REFRESH RATE: 144HZ / BRIGHTNESS: 400CD/M2

VX2718-2KPC-MHD

VIEWSONIC **£239**

This budget 165Hz 1440p panel cuts too many corners

6 VA panel technology used to spell certain doom when it comes to pixel response. More recently, Samsung, among others, has proven that VA can deliver. If not quite IPS-matching response, then certainly good enough performance for all but the most demanding gamers.

Unfortunately, the Viewsonic VX2718 is a VA screen slightly out of the old school. Crank this 27-inch, 1440p curved monitor over for the first time and it doesn't bode well. The VX2718 is a bit of a blurry mess. It does improve with a little time and temperature. But even fully

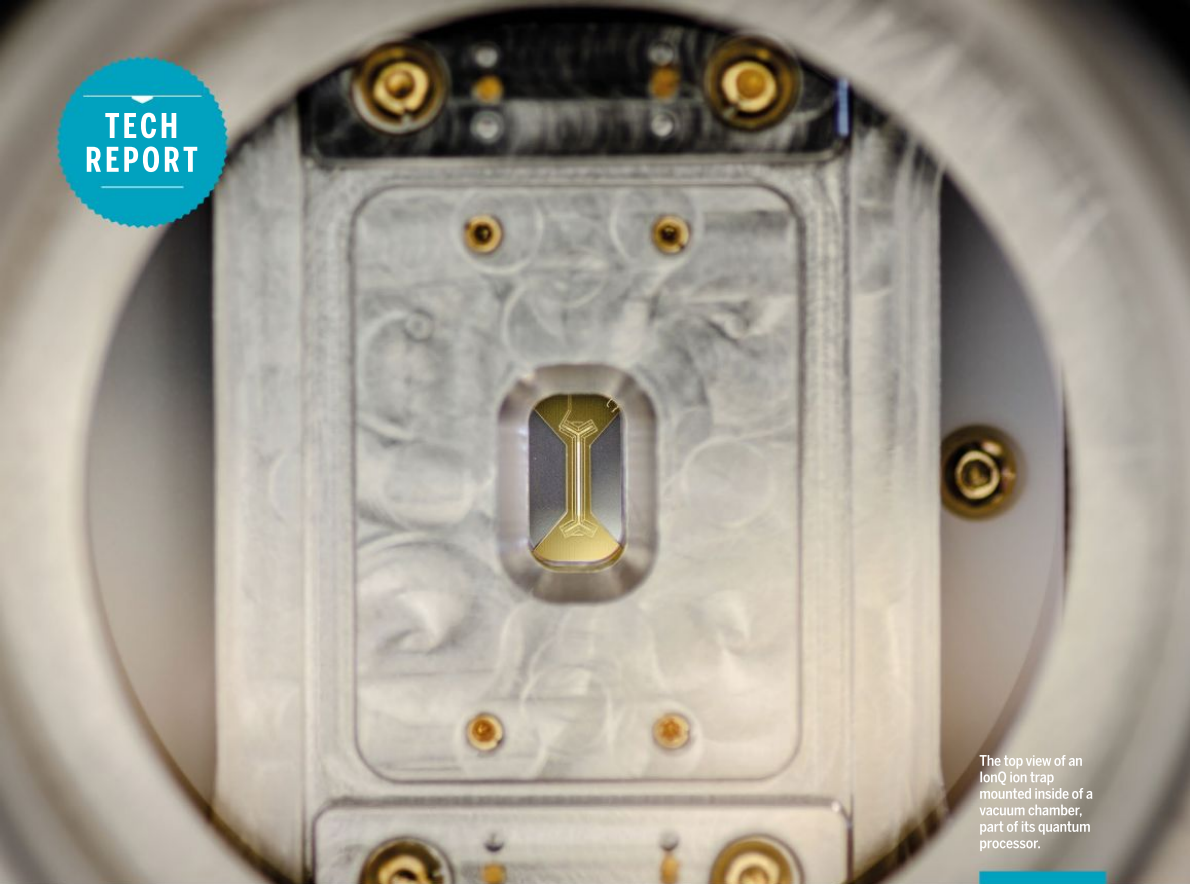
warmed up, it's simply not as quick as the latest IPS panels. Or the implied performance of the 1ms MPRT response.

The 1440p native resolution on a 27-inch panel is a sweet combo for balancing frame rates with in-game detail, while the VA panel tech delivers plenty of contrast. Of course, it's competitively priced, but the mediocre response and lack of punch might feel a bit too budget for most people.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Attractive price
- Frame rate and pixel count ratio
- Good contrast from VA panel

SPECS SCREEN SIZE: 27-INCH / PANEL TYPE: VA / ASPECT RATIO: 16:9 / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 2560 X 1440 / RESPONSE TIME: 1MS (MPRT) / REFRESH RATE: 165HZ / BRIGHTNESS: 250CD/M2



The top view of an IonQ ion trap mounted inside of a vacuum chamber, part of its quantum processor.

CRYPTO CRACKERS

Could a sufficiently powerful computer bring down Bitcoin?

Anyone who is not heartily sick of the words 'blockchain', 'crypto', and 'NFT' (and, indeed, mentions of quantum computing in these pages) may be interested to hear that, in a few years' time, the whole thing might go away.

It'll probably be replaced by something worse, of course, but the argument over the subject is interesting. Could a sufficiently powerful quantum computer, one that's not been invented as yet, bring the whole blockchain network down around our ankles?

It's easy, and often fun, to attribute remarkable powers to inventions of the future. Imagining VR that links itself directly to your visual cortex does not make it a reality, but quantum computers exist in the same way VR helmets do: the ones we know about are very early models that could all do with some improvement. And the ones we don't know about? Well, who knows what the world's governments are up to?

Wild speculation aside, the problem here is asymmetric cryptography. Two keys are generated, and they have a mathematical relationship – the public key can be derived from the private key, but not the other way around. The public key is just that – public. It's used by anyone who wants to encrypt information that only you can read. The asymmetric bit means that running the encrypted data

through the public key backwards (as you would with something like Enigma, for example) doesn't decrypt it: for that you need the private key which you don't tell anyone, even your psychiatrist. From this system the blockchain, Bitcoin, NFTs and a market worth over \$100 billion were born.

Now, far be it for us to suggest a system in which miners can screw up both the environment and the supply of GPUs to gamers, and which can see a single grey pixel sell for \$1.36 million at Sotheby's, might be a bit silly. We'd just point out that this magazine costs a mere £6.99 yet contains many more pixels, some of them not grey. Enough, we'd estimate, for more than one per reader. But then we're not selling PC Gamer as an NFT. Yet...

BLOCKED

For those still stumbling around in the dark about how a blockchain works, here's a summary. When a transaction is requested, a 'block' containing that transaction is created. This is then sent to every 'node', or participant, on the particular network (that can be Bitcoin, Ethereum, Dogecoin, whatever). The nodes work to validate the transaction, using the SHA256 algorithm (in the case of Bitcoin) to 'hash' the block into a 256bit hexadecimal number that uniquely identifies it. This is 'mining', and the first miner to validate the transaction in this way is rewarded with some Bitcoin (6.25 at the time of writing) depending on the difficulty.

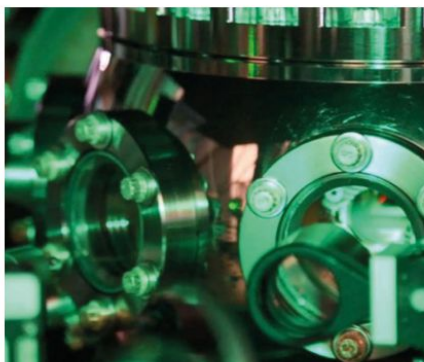


Bitcoin billionaire

Bitcoin's inventor, who goes by the pseudonym of Satoshi Nakamoto, allegedly has a million of them in a potentially insecure wallet, a tempting target for someone with the right sort of processing power to go after. Nakamoto stepped back from the cryptocurrency project in 2010, and debate over his identity has raged ever since.



FAR LEFT: IBM's Hummingbird 65-qubit quantum processor.



LEFT: Honeywell's Quantum H1 computer has ten qubits.

NFT MADNESS *The price of digital art goes up... and down again*



1 EVERYDAY: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS
Beeple's collage, based on his popular Instagram, sold for \$69.3 million.



2 THE PIXEL
Digital artist Pak sold The Pixel, which is literally a grey square, for \$1.3 million at a Sotheby's auction.



3 JACK DORSEY'S FIRST TWEET
A piece of internet history? Perhaps, but is it worth \$2.9 million?



4 CRYPTOKITTIES DRAGON
Got 600 Etherium (\$1.45m) burning a hole in your hardware wallet? Why not buy a virtual pet?

That difficulty is altered depending on how fast blocks are added to the chain, as the Bitcoin protocol aims for six new blocks an hour. Difficulty is measured by the number of leading zeroes on an acceptable hash result. Each block, along with everything we've measured so far, contains a 'nonce' (a Number Only used oNCE). This is a number that can be varied to get the desired result, as changing it alters the hash. So if the difficulty is 15, you alter the nonce until your hash comes out with 15 leading zeroes. Once validated, the new block is added to a chain, with each block's header containing the hash of the one before it, and distributed across the network again. Only then is the transaction done.

Blockchain is secure because making even the smallest change to a transaction that's been validated changes the hash produced, so everyone on the network would notice. There's also an additional security feature known as 'pay to public key hash' that hashes public keys and only reveals them when a transaction is initiated. Also, in a perfect world, each address would only be used once. Address reuse is rife, however, and a study by Deloitte found that around 25% of all Bitcoins are vulnerable in this way, along with the many, many cryptocurrencies whose owners have lost their private keys, and therefore cannot transfer them out of vulnerable wallets.

Still, the system seems to work pretty well as long as no one has a sufficiently powerful computer. To derive a private key from a public one involves tackling an elliptic curve discrete logarithm problem that would take a regular computer somewhere in the range of 65 million billion years to

solve. An unencrypted public key is included with every Bitcoin transaction – it acts as the address of the recipient – and left unprotected for the time it takes for the network to confirm the block, which is around ten minutes. Theoretically, that's enough time for a powerful enough quantum computer to calculate the private key and replace the recipient's address with someone else's before the hash is generated. Miners are changing the nonce all the time, so a change to a different part of the block could go unnoticed.

And then there's another thing. You could use a quantum computer to mine much, much faster than everybody else, inserting your own blocks into the chain for potentially nefarious purposes or to bring the whole system down.

So, the big question is, how many qubits would a theoretical quantum computer need to take a tin-opener to Bitcoin? 4,000, according to Miruna Rosca, a PhD student in post-quantum cryptography, in an interview with Decrypt. How many are there in the current most powerful known quantum computer? 72 (Google). Or maybe 10 (Honeywell). Or perhaps 32 (IonQ). The Chinese Jiuzhang computer doesn't give a qubit figure, but its operators claim it's 10 billion times faster than Google's. IBM is promising a 1,000-qubit machine by 2023. It took 14 years for X86 CPUs to go from 1GHz to 4GHz, so could 4,000 qubits be here by 2037? We wouldn't bet our Bitcoins against it, so it's now up to blockchain architects to evolve quantum-secure cryptography before their secrets are opened up for the world to see. ■

Ian Evenden

YOU COULD USE A QUANTUM COMPUTER TO MINE MUCH, MUCH FASTER THAN EVERYBODY ELSE

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trustworthy manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

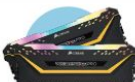
MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,666

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi MSI £260 A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 10900K Intel £529 If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Founders Edition Nvidia £649 The RTX 3080 is the flagship graphics card of an entire new GPU generation.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200 Corsair £176 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow with RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN750 1TB Western Digital £169 Western Digital is back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Not seen here: classic Platinum Games' combat.



“The first time I played it, I think I just found this all a little confusing”

NIER: AUTOMATA remains one of the best and weirdest RPGs ever

I am an idiot for not playing more of *Nier: Automata* when it first came out. Yoko Taro's hybrid RPG-meets-brawler-meets-shoot-'em-up caught my interest the first time I played it back in 2017, but after getting to the end of the first of its many endings I just didn't stick with it. *Nier: Automata* had me a little confused. I just didn't get it at first. But I do now.

I've been replaying *Nier: Automata* in anticipation of *Nier Replicant ver.1.22474487139...* (yes, that's its actual name), the remade prequel released this month. Also it's spring and there's not a whole lot of new games to play. But I'm so glad I

STEVEN MESSNER



THIS MONTH
Poked and prodded the big question of what it means to be human.

ALSO PLAYED
Outriders, Genesis Noir

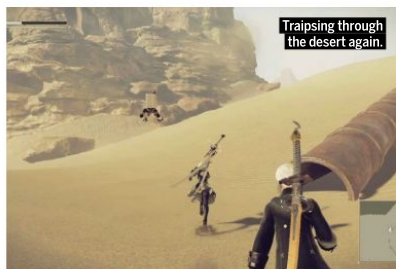
randomly decided to give *Automata* a second chance.

The way it blends genres is sublime, which is something I think I took for granted the first time I was playing it. It's an RPG but with Platinum Games' signature brawler combat, and occasionally it deviates into whole other genres like bullet-hell shooters. Mid-fight you'll jump into a flight suit and suddenly be in an on-rails section, having to

dodge projectiles littering the screen while shooting down enemy ships. It's all extremely cool, and it makes *Automata* feel unpredictable in a way RPGs rarely do.

The combat is a lot of fun and I've begun to appreciate all the clever ways the RPG progression systems change and tweak it. Basic attacks and abilities can all be powered up by different chips, of which you can only equip a certain amount. But what's brilliant is that these chips aren't just for your combat abilities. The entire

WHAT'S BRILLIANT IS THAT THESE CHIPS AREN'T JUST FOR YOUR COMBAT ABILITIES



UI, like health bars and experience bars, are only displayed if you equip the proper chips. You can turn it all off if you want to squeeze out some extra attack damage, but then you'll be flying blind. It's brilliant.

Nier has tons of weird quirks like this. The first time I played it, I think I just found this all a little confusing and odd. But over the past few years I've really come to adore games that aren't obsessed with being perfectly balanced and smoothed over. Friction is fun – especially when that friction forces you to engage with a game in unexpected ways.

The story is hitting a lot better for me too. One of *Automata's* weaknesses is that it buries you under a mountain of sidequests which are mostly forgettable. I painstakingly completed as many of them as I could the first time around. I think that's partly why I ultimately abandoned the game before properly finishing it. This time around, I'm skipping a good chunk of them and focusing on the story and it's coming together in a much more engrossing way because I'm not taking hours-long detours between each twist.

I still haven't quite beaten it yet, but *Nier: Automata* is quickly becoming one of my favourite games ever. It's just so wholly unique – and that's a hard thing to come by, especially in big-budget games that are typically made to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. *Nier: Automata* is a treasure. ■



“They look like little plastic discs”

Making a token effort in **TRIALS OF FIRE**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Blew up a lot of little tokens with fireballs.

ALSO PLAYED
Legend of Keepers,
Impossible Creatures

Since the very beginning of the hobby, videogames have been hugely influenced by tabletop games – but some certainly wear that influence a lot more on their sleeve than others.

Trials of Fire is a roguelike that combines about as many mechanics inspired by tabletop games as you possibly could. Turn-based combat over a hex-grid, like a board game; character actions dictated by the drawing of cards from a deck, as in a CCG; levelling up, loot, and narrative events that trace their origins back to pen-and-paper role playing.

It all comes together wonderfully. Despite combining so many well-worn ideas (and having so much competition in the rapidly expanding roguelike word salad genre) its fights feel like a refreshingly different take on turn-based strategy. Clever twists – like having to burn cards to gain the ‘willpower’ you need to fuel other cards, constantly forcing tough decisions – make all the difference. It feels like a platter of established

concepts given an exciting new flavour by some inventive seasonings.

But my favourite thing about *Trials of Fire* is that it's not just inspired by its cardboard-and-paper predecessors in mechanics, but in its visuals too. As a modest budget game from a relatively small team, it was never going to be a graphical powerhouse. But where other teams might have gone for something like a retro pixel-art look or basic 3D models, *Trials of Fire* instead leans into its roots by representing all characters with counters.

COUNTER ATTACK

They look like little plastic discs with some art of the hero or monster printed on top. As you move them around, they clack pleasantly onto the field. Sparking spell effects erupt incongruously out of them to blast towards enemies and slide them around the field. When hit by an attack, they jump and clatter about like someone's got upset at board game night and slammed the table.

In motion it's a really striking and very endearing look, and one I would never have thought I'd find so impressive. I've talked in previous issues about looking for a sense of physicality – there's a satisfaction to picking up and placing a tangible object in a board game that videogames aren't often interested in recreating. When a rare example can capture a little of that magic, I can't help but be charmed. ■



Would not recommend visiting this creepy church. TripAdvisor has done me dirty.



This rural village is hidden away in a mountainscape swallowed by fog.



“I’m scrambling around in the dark fending off monstrous wicker men”

Grappling with myths and monsters in hand-pencilled folk horror **MUNDAUN**

S witzerland’s rolling hills and snowy peaks seem like the ideal destination for a bit of peace and quiet. But in the horror game *Mundaun*, instead of being charmed by Swiss countryside, my first day in the snowy Alps ended with me scrambling around in the dark fending off monstrous wicker men with a broken pitchfork. My first day in town has been, in a word, surreal. The game’s heavy charcoal hand-drawn visuals really should have been my first clue that this was not going to be the getaway I had envisioned.

A little bit of context: you play as a young man named Curdin, who has returned to the secluded rural village of Mundaun after receiving a troubling letter. The local priest has written that Curdin’s grandfather has tragically died in a barn fire, but don’t worry – the funeral and burial have all been sorted, and there’s no reason why you should ever need to return to Mundaun, ever. So, of course you go to investigate...

After leaving the safety of the bus and a short hike later, I finally arrive at Mundaun and I’m immediately

▶ RACHEL WATTS



THIS MONTH
Had a conversation about dark dreams with a severed goat’s head named Allegría.

ALSO PLAYED
Cozy Grove, *Genesis Noir*

greeted by the burnt husk of my grandfather’s barn. I search what is left of the barn, and my soul leaves my body as I come face-to-face with old grandpappy himself, the white of his open eyes standing out against the charred remains of the rest of his body. That’s not all that lurks inside the barn, and within the ashy remains, something grabs my hand – a ghost, a phantom, or something else entirely. As they let go, I look down at my hand to see that it’s turned burnt and black like scorched tree bark.

But the troubles of my first day in Mundaun don’t end there. As I amble through the quaint meadows and peaks, I meet a stone-faced little girl

who has only goats for friends and a hysterical priest who babbles on about demons, his church defiled with scrawlings of hellish retribution. They’re not much for company, and an uneasy feeling starts to sink in of just how alone and vulnerable I am.

NOT THE BEES

Night begins to set in and as I head back to grandpa’s house I hear a hollow wailing. Peeking around a tree I see a group of ominous wicker men. They look like the monsters you’d see in bedtime stories meant to spook children, and would almost seem comical if it wasn’t for the incessant howling. As I try to defend myself with my broken pitchfork, I fumble for the box of matches in my bag, set these thankfully very flammable monsters ablaze, and run for the house, slamming the door behind me to block out their screams.

It’s only been one day in Mundaun but I already feel completely out of my depth. Delving into this village’s long forgotten history feels like I’ve fallen head-first off the side of one of the mountains, hurtling down into the snowy depths.

The Swiss Alps in *Mundaun* are certainly enchanting, but for all the wrong reasons. ■

I MEET A STONE-FACED LITTLE GIRL WHO HAS ONLY GOATS FOR FRIENDS

“He moved from asteroid to asteroid, carving gashes along their sides”

Can you teach a five-year-old child to play **ELITE: DANGEROUS**?

Playing *Elite: Dangerous* is like parenting – you are continually overestimating and underestimating the abilities of both your ship and child. You think your Vulture could just take on that wing of Deadly-ranked Eagles after an hour of swatting away sad little gangsters, then find yourself floating home. Similarly, my five-year-old son's suggestion that he play that game where you “become like a police officer, but not, and shoot space pirates” should have given me pause.

However, after a lockdown grinding the *Lego Star Wars* games past the point where anything has maintained its lustre, I thought this was a good idea. *Elite* has been woven into my life for 37 years. Could I hand down my love of the big black?

Besides, while bounty hunters are pretty much the bad guys in *Star Wars*, *Elite: Dangerous* promises a chance to be the police. At his age, conflict and goodies vs baddies are fundamental building blocks for child development. I wanted to encourage this tendency towards Lawful Good.

MATT KILLEEN



THIS MONTH
Tried to merge fatherhood with space law enforcement.

ALSO PLAYED
FIFA 21, *Far Cry New Dawn*

His record as co-op gunner wasn't good. He once shot a federal security Viper, whose friends turned my ship into a 40 million credit cloud of tinfoil. But we can't play the simulations, as he wants it to be real. So, I bought him his own Sidewinder, and enough ARX to paint it, install the unnecessary fins and gills, and give his Holo-Me an unpleasant Action Man scar. Thus, the Small Attacker was born.

SHIP HAPPENS

Of course, you can't start out as a bounty hunter with just nominative determinism. He wanted an

Anaconda, the apex predator of the Resource Extraction Site (Medium). But these monsters cost more credits than I have made in my 300+ hours.

I was more worried about how he'd handle the difficult docking and launch process, but it turns out things have changed since my day. All ships start with a docking computer as standard. That precipitous learning curve is now a gentle slope, and to my immense pride, he breezed through the tutorial.

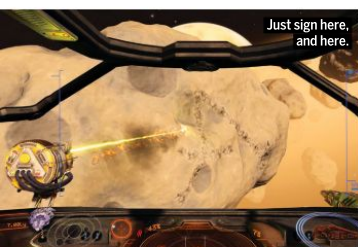
As soon he had his pilot's licence, he suddenly wanted to be a miner. He found a High Tech system, purchased a mining laser, installed a refinery and headed for the nearest ringed planet. But when he got there, he just moved from asteroid to asteroid, carving gashes along their sides with his laser.

Then I saw that he was actually writing his name.

There is an exquisite tension between what you want for your children, and what they are. *Elite: Dangerous*, like life, offers choice. You can be the scourge of the galaxy, go quietly about your business, or just muck about. It's about doing your own thing, and he was.

“Do my name next,” I told him. ■

AS SOON HE HAD HIS PILOT'S LICENCE, HE SUDDENLY WANTED TO BE A MINER



Just sign here, and here.



Behold, the Small Attacker, destroyer of rocks.



In my day we had to dock ourselves and pay the mill owner to let us work there.

HITMAN 3'S SEASON OF GREED

Agent 47 goes for the gold many times over. *By James Davenport*

The first arc of *Hitman 3's Season of Greed*, the *Seven Deadly Sins* expansion, is a gilded and grimy excuse to revisit Dubai for a challenging escalation. Access to the entire expansion will cost you £25, or £5 for each of the seven updates, doled out every four to six weeks or so. Each season accompanies a glut of free stuff, acting as a thematic wrapper for the usual assembly of escalations, featured contracts, and elusive targets. What you get for the money here is more of that stuff, with some extra attention paid to presentation.

We're taking a trip deep into the mind of Agent 47 with each escalation, or so I'm told by the warped voice of Diana in Dubai's The Greed Enumeration. Agent 47 wakes in a void wearing the ugliest suit I've ever seen, like someone unfamiliar with computers drew a circuit board pattern from memory and painted it gold. Hooray for us, it's one you get to keep for paying up.

A pool of coins appears, along with a strange golden frog statue, its head tilted back and mouth open wide. "Coins!" it screams. Agent 47 needs therapy. The Dubai level melts in around the monument to wealth, but everything's a bit off. The NPC voices are all pitched down and the level is filtered through a supersaturated golden light.

Here's where the escalation's gimmick is introduced. Feed the frog enough coins and you get access to an item or weapon locked up in a glass box behind it. But you only earn coins from assassinating targets, which are only revealed once you've assassinated the last target. Thing is, you can leave the level at any time. You don't need to kill every target. But if you're greedy, you can keep pressing your luck, killing targets to reveal the next in order to sweep up as many coins as possible. Coins also carry across escalations, with some

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE April 2021	DEVELOPER IO Interactive
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK bit.ly/3mxYKET

big dumps of challenge XP handed out for finishing all three escalations with as many coins as possible. It's a pretty neat twist, though I wish there were rewards beyond an ugly suit and a coin skin.

After snapping a few necks in the first round, you'll need to kill someone with a lethal throw. But first you need to find an item that kills on impact, one of which is locked behind the frog for five coins. I know Dubai well, so I picked up a screwdriver and nailed the guy from cover, except I forgot he was in front of a camera. And so the usual untangling of the stealth knot ensued. I got out with all the coins, sticking my neck out to clean them up while guards patrolled the patio.

GREED IS GOOD

Things get trickier in round two. No more outfit changes. First: a classic neck-snapping. Then, drowning a guarded NPC. Luckily I knew where the rat poison was and a perfect climbing route to poison my victim unnoticed, but if you've yet to hollow out Dubai, this is going to be a frustrating escalation. After that, I need to wrap this all up by taking out two victims with an axe. So do I spend the coins on a climbing axe I can conceal in my suit jacket or do I risk it by picking up a fire axe from



I PICKED UP A SCREWDRIVER AND NAILED THE GUY FROM COVER

their fixed locations around the level? An interesting choice, though paying up for the concealed axe feels like failure since you're spending coins and then missing out on the biggest challenge XP rewards.

The third escalation is truly a final test for Dubai players, and one that I don't think I'll have the patience for. I won't spoil it, but it's pretty tedious and frustrating, gutting the reactive play *Hitman's* sandbox excels at when things go wrong. I'm all for an exhaustive skill test integrated into *Hitman 3*, but as part of the premium DLC it feels like a punishment. Give me reasons to play *Hitman 3* in more creative, funny ways rather than as a boring, conservative assassin.

But hey, a couple bucks for a new suit, a spooky filter, and some super challenging asks? Sure. I'm down for as many configurations of *Hitman 3's* stealth sandbox that IO Interactive can wring out of it. However, this one feels like it's more for the players that have truly mastered Dubai, finished up everything there is to do there already and don't mind playing *Hitman* at its most methodical and its least exciting. ■

FROG FRIENDS

Our fav frogs in PC gaming (toads welcome)



A FROG
From *Frogger*
Obligatory mention. Has died billions of times. Made of squares.



KWOLOG
From *Ori and the Blind Forest*
That's a big frog! Hall of fame's this way, my dude.



DEMON OF SONG
From *Dark Souls 2*
This frog's got a whole-ass giant inside it.



FROG MOUNT
From *Ark*
It can wear glasses, so it's a classic. I won't be listening to counterarguments.

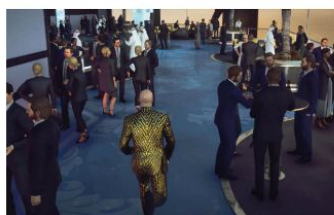


HUGE TOAD
From *Hearthstone*
It's cute and horrible, which is what I expect from a good toad.



GORF
From *Mortal Shell*
It's frog backwards. It went to the Castlevania school of spelling.

Agent 47 can't claim #nofilter in the Season of Greed.



Spot the 47. Look closer. Hold on, let me spit-shine his head. How about now?

I knew exactly how to poison this person and drown them in a toilet. Sigh.



FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS, BUT WEIRD

Mix it up with some randomness. *By Chris Livingston*

The great thing about playing a deep and rich RPG like *Fallout: New Vegas* is that the choices you make can ensure each playthrough will be a little bit different. But despite playing the game a number of times since its release in 2010, I've never had a playthrough turn out quite so different as when I installed the *NV Randomizer* mod.

The mod, as you can probably guess from the name and a quick glance at the images on these pages, randomises the hell out of *Fallout: New Vegas*. Which is why within just a couple hours of beginning my game I was already armed with a hammer capable of one-shotting most enemies, a talking coyote had asked me to submit to a credit check, and I'd met an NCR military policeman whose head was a just skull in a fishbowl.

I'd also come across Mr House within an hour of starting the game. The real Mr House. Not the computer screen version, the withered old man on life support version. And not at the Lucky 38 casino as you might expect. I just found him out in the desert. That's pretty damn random!

HOUSE CALL

Let's back up a bit. With the mod installed, I awoke in good old Doc Mitchell's house in Goodsprings, a place I've been many times before, though I'd never seen Doc dressed like he was preparing for a fetish party. He was bare chested, with leather strapped raider pants and a power armour helmet covering his head. I'm not trying to kink-shame Doc Mitchell, it was just a departure from his typical Western settler getup. He walked me through the basics, and then revealed my randomised stats and handed me some randomised starting gear, which included riot armour – not bad for a newbie – and a unique and massive two-handed hammer called

I MET AN NCR MILITARY POLICEMAN WHOSE HEAD WAS A JUST SKULL IN A FISHBOWL

'Oh, Baby!'. It is, essentially, a super sledge only it hits much harder than the standard version. It's one of the deadliest melee weapons in *Fallout: New Vegas*, in fact, and I began the game with it. Randomness appeared to be working out well for me!

I left doc's house and came across Victor, the securitron robot who dug me out of a shallow grave. Only Victor wasn't as much a robot as he was a bighorner, those weird mutated bulls. He still acted like Victor, and we had a quick chat, but it was hard not to feel a bit weird to be talking to an enormous mutated cow.

Those weren't the only randomised bits in Goodsprings. As far as the actual bighorners that are usually grazing around the dusty town, they'd been replaced by a

RANDOM CHANCE *Other great randomiser mods for the games you love*



DARK SOULS 3: STRAYSOULS

Scrambles up all the monsters, bosses, and NPCs in an already incredibly difficult game.



MINECRAFT: LOOT TABLE RANDOMIZER

Break any block in the game and you'll receive a completely random pickup from them.



SKYRIM: ALCHEMY EFFECTS RANDOMIZER

Mixing potions has never been more surprising. Be careful what you drink!



GTA SAN ANDREAS: RAINBOMIZER

Randomises pretty much everything: vehicles, weapons, missions and even dialogue.

radioach, a nightstalker, and a spore carrier, which are disturbing looking fungal green humanoids. They still acted like bighorners, though, in as they didn't bite me or irradiate me.

BONE TO PICK

Oh! You know Trudy, the bartender at the Prospector Saloon? Don't worry, she wasn't a mutant cow or a fungus monster, she was still Trudy! Though one of her arms had been, at some point, completely skeletonised from the elbow down. She seemed OK with it, though. Sunny Smiles, good old tutorial Sunny, was also still mostly Sunny, though her dog Cheyenne had been replaced by a molerat. And a few minutes later, Sunny was replaced by a pile of ash, because I accidentally shot her with a hololrifle while aiming at a lakelurk king, which had replaced the relatively harmless geckos we were supposed to be hunting.

See, it's not just clothing and models that have been randomised in the *NV Randomizer*, it's monster spawns as well. Which means even in a starting zone, you might run into a powerful monster your low-level character is not equipped to fight. Unless the mod has already equipped you to fight it by giving you a friggin' hololaser right out of the gate. Which it did. Anyway, Sunny died, but so did the lakelurk king and the ghost trapper the mod had replaced the other gecko with.

As I sifted through the corpses and Sunny's ash pile for loot, it suddenly grew dark, nearly pitch black. I checked the clock and it was just about noon, which is an odd time for the sun to be blotted out by an inky blackness that made it hard to even see the unearned hololaser in my hands. That's because the mod randomises the weather and sky and atmosphere as well, pretty much every few minutes. You can go from a bright, clear day to a radioactive green sky to a blood-red sunset to a completely monochromatic filter in

the space of a few minutes. It definitely keeps things interesting.

Speaking of interesting, my level one character finally ran into some problems even my ridiculously overpowered starting kit couldn't handle, when I tried running from Goodsprings to Primm. Along the road, I spotted something in the distance moving very quickly, which turned out to be a deathclaw mother battling a giant zion mantis. The mantis, despite its giant designation, was quickly killed, and then the deathclaw, running at a speed which I'd estimate to be about 60 miles per hour, obliterated me with one swipe before I could even register it had turned in my direction. Hmm. I think it's not just the monster spawns that have been randomised, but the



WITH THE NV RANDOMIZER MOD, THE VEGAS STRIP IS... WELL, IT'S SOMETHING ELSE

monster's attributes, because I've never seen a deathclaw that fast. It looked like I was watching a game of *Fallout: New Vegas* on fast-forward.

After a few more deaths from other extremely deadly monsters along the route, I finally arrive in Primm to behold still more randomisation, like Ruby Nash holding a flaming sword, Powder Gangers dressed like old timey gangsters, and plenty of other amusing nonsense. And after I'd left Primm with a new sheriff in charge, I found myself in the desert being attacked by a brahmin, a giant rat, and a ghost harvester, which is an odd trio to be hanging out together. Odder still was finding Mr House nearby, his life support systems just plunked out there in the middle of the desert. I couldn't interact with him, unfortunately, though he did

sort of move his head to look around a little. Until I killed him, at which point he stopped doing that.

Having found Mr House in the middle of nowhere, I became curious as to what might be in Vegas to replace Mr House, so I decided to skip ahead a bit. I used a cheat code to add the entire world's locations to my nearly empty Pip-Boy map and fast-travelled to the Vegas strip.

BOWLED OVER

With the *NV Randomizer* mod, the Vegas strip is... well, it's something else. Robot security guards have been replaced with just about anything you can think of, which is why a talking coyote told me I'd need to submit to a credit check if I wanted to go inside. Citizens of Vegas, who were often already ridiculous, are even more so now, with a variety of masks, oversized policeman's hats, and in the case of the NCR cop, a skull in a fishbowl in place of a normal head. Another lakelurk welcomed me to the casino, an enormous yao guai crouched near the elevator, and Mr House, as it turned out, had been replaced by an enormous, towering robot that waved its massive metal arms and claws around while it spoke. I guess Mr House being a robot isn't too off the mark, really.

Naturally, I had to go check out Caesar's Legion, so I paid a visit to Nipton, where I found one Legionary wearing footie pyjamas and a mountie hat, accompanied by mechanical scorpions and glistening pink centaurs instead of mongrels. It was clear Caesar had really done away with the dress code when I went to his camp, where I saw Legion slaves walking around in full power armour and a Praetorian Guard wearing a sweater vest, slacks, and a baseball cap at least three sizes too big. Dale Barton, the trader who normally looks like a cowboy, was now a woman wearing an elegant gown with a meat cleaver strapped to her hip, though that wasn't as weird as the fact that I could also see through her as if she was a ghost.

Vulpes Inculpa was half-naked wearing a motorcycle helmet, and while his face was male his body was clearly female. Caesar, somewhat anticlimactically, was simply dressed in dirty rags and rusty helmet.

As for Benny, the guy I was supposed to be tracking down? No more checkered blazer for Benny. Instead it was bright red pyjamas and a fireman's hat and gasmask. Not quite the slick style he has in the vanilla game, but I've got to hand it to him. It's still quite a look. ■



NEVER CHANGE *The mod is fun, but I'd never want these parts to change*



BOONE

A great and complex character, and one hell of a shot. Couriers should never leave home without his protection.



GHOULS

I rally don't know why, but some of the coolest characters in the *Fallout* games always turn out to be ghouls...



NUCLEAR MISSILES

Big nukes. Mini nukes. It's just not *Fallout* without the occasional mushroom cloud on the horizon.



CINEMATIC SLOW-MO

Even after all these years, a nice cinematic kill in super slow-mo still satisfies me.





MAKE YOUR PC LAST

Keep your ageing rig going as the GPU shortage continues. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

TIME
Three hours

VITAL LINKS
Best indie games:
bit.ly/3aREBEH
Overclocking guide:
bit.ly/3t0oyi9
Top RAM:
bit.ly/3xhZcLR



WAITING GAME

1 The hardest, and most important, thing is to be patient. No, perhaps you won't be exploring Night City, Enoch, or Verdansk at the highest settings with frame rates in triple figures, but try to keep an open mind for now.



GOING BACK

2 Tuck into the less-demanding games in your pile of shame while you're waiting. You may even find that, when the GPU shortage of 2020/21 ends, today's cutting-edge experiences may benefit from a hefty discount when you're ready.



SMALL FRY

3 Or if you're up-to-date on your backlog, take this opportunity to expand your horizons with indie games. On storefronts like itch.io you'll find cheap, experimental games that tend to be much less graphically taxing on your system.



ONLY FANS

4 Many issues arise from your PC getting too hot and bothered – your GPU's full power may even get restricted. Consider investing in extra fans and assessing your airflow. You should also move your PC off a carpet onto a hard floor.



SOLID UPGRADE

5 One of the best upgrades you can make is swapping out slow mechanical hard drives for SSD storage. Your PC will run quieter and load times will be dramatically slashed.

SPRING CLEANING

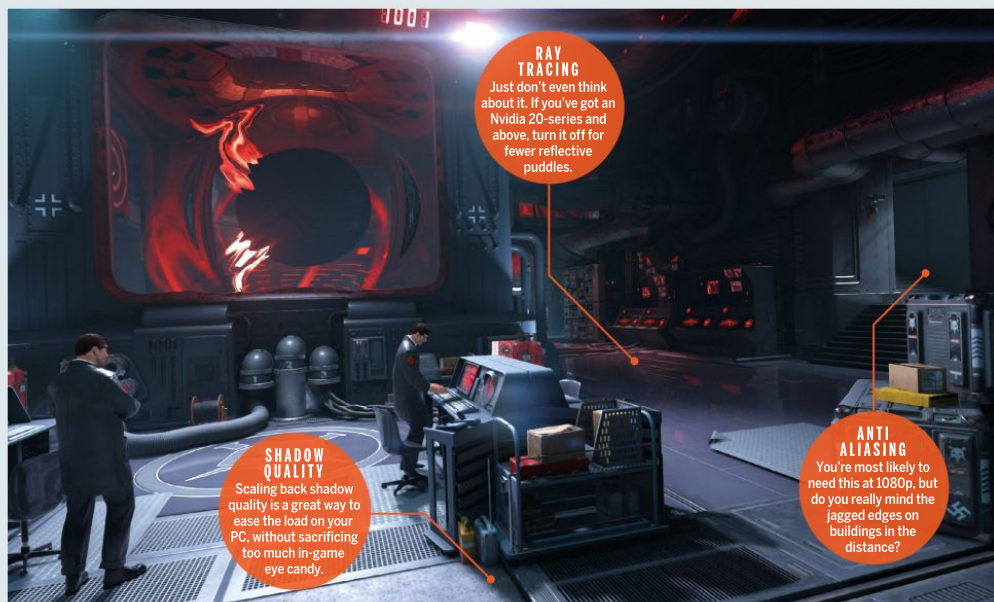
6 Unfortunately dust is going to coat the inside of your PC in time, which may harm performance. Make sure your PC is unplugged before getting out the lint-free cloth and compressed air.



TRUST THE PROCESSOR

7 A great value upgrade is a new motherboard and CPU. With a more modern chipset in hand, pick a more advanced processor with higher clock speeds and six-or-more cores for CPU hounds like *Flight Sim*, *Red Dead*, and *GTA V*.

GOING DOWN *Reduce these graphics settings to boost performance*



SHORT MEMORY

8 Boosting your RAM won't make a tremendous difference with most games, if you've got the right setup. At least 16GB should do in most cases, but ensure you're running your sticks in at least dual-channel mode (2x8GB or 4x4GB).



DEEP LEARNING

9 Why make your graphics card work harder than it needs to? If you've got an Nvidia GPU (20-series or higher), take advantage of DLSS in qualifying games by letting your GPU push fewer pixels and have artificial intelligence do the rest.



TIME'S UP

10 Overclocking just isn't as big a deal as it used to be, but it remains a last-resort strategy for squeezing some extra juice out of existing parts. Check the 'Vital Links' section on the previous page for our full guide to overclocking.

BLUE SKY THINKING

11 If your current GPU has given up, stream a better one from the Cloud. If you've got a fast internet connection and can tolerate a bit of latency, cloud gaming services like GeForce Now may tide you over during the shortage.



READY MADE

12 If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Rather than staying up all hours refreshing Amazon and Newegg, look into pre-built systems with the GPU you want. You may be waiting a while, but at least you'll give your Ctrl + F5 a rest.





ROLLING THE DICE IN **DISHONORED 2** PART 1

Putting Arkane's whalepunk
immersive sim on shuffle.

By Alex Spencer

THE RULES

- 1 Powers and playstyle chosen by the dice.
- 2 Roll for new rules each mission.
- 3 Stick by them, no matter what.

Stepping off the boat and onto the shores of Karnaca for the first time, Emily Kaldwin – former empress of this entire land – has two things of note to her name. The 172 runes, courtesy of the 100% save file I nabbed off the internet, and her instructions: *Shadow Walk – Rob the shop – Kill only target.*

The variables will shuffle for each mission, thanks to a slightly elaborate system we'll dig into shortly. But for now, let's focus on honouring these ones. It's probably worth mentioning that the target of this mission isn't even in this first level – we'll be getting to her later – so for now, it's just a case of not killing anyone. Luckily, my first power has non-lethal applications.

I spend a chunk of the runes unlocking and fully

upgrading Shadow Walk. In its final form, I can not only transform Emily into a black smoke creature that creeps across the ground on its sharp fingertips, but slip through rat tunnels and take out multiple enemies with tendrils of darkness (kind of like *The Darkness*, remember that?). It's an ability I'd never rush to choose myself, honestly – which is the point of this whole exercise, pushing me to experience a game I've completed multiple times in a new way.

OK, that just leaves the matter of the shop. I wander in as an average customer, and the shopkeeper starts chatting away. He seems like a nice bloke, but I quickly tuck away my guilt and get to figuring out how I can rob him blind. A letter found upstairs lets me know an assistant took their key into the condemned building next door, never to be seen again.

Smashing through the warning signs, I quickly discover *why* the building has been condemned: bloodflies. If you haven't had the misfortune of running into these critters, think oversized mosquitos, if the disease they carried could turn you into some sort of zombie. They're sensitive to fire, and luckily this place used to be a pub, which means there are plenty of bottles of flammable whisky around.

With the help of my old friend the booze, I make it through the entire place and pop out onto a balcony that overlooks the end of the level. But I have a heist to pull, and there's still no sign of that assistant. So I take the most logical course of action, and start making a corpse pile. Even as my cadaver collection builds, though, there's no sign of the key I'm looking for.

It's at this point, searching for my next body, that I spot the tiny gap in a doorway blocked by furniture. Squeezing through, I find the assistant – turns out he's not fully expired, and is walking around with a bloodfly nest swelling in his stomach. A quick application of whisky remedies that. I grab his key, head back to the shop, and use Shadow Walk to sneak up on the shopkeeper and incapacitate him. My gains are primarily money – which isn't much use if I'm going to be robbing my way through

the campaign – and some fun, but 100% lethal, toys. Again, not much use to me. At least, not until the next roll of the dice.

SUPREME RULER

As I take a carriage to the Addermire Institute, where my first target awaits, let's talk about those dice for a bit. You see, as a veteran

game critic, I understand that elegance and simplicity are key to good design. Which is why my system involves an Excel spreadsheet, three differently-shaped dice, and a pirate-themed coin from a bag I once bought thinking they had chocolate inside.

At the beginning of each mission (which, for these purposes, I'm counting as anything that features a both a shop and a target), I roll the dice – a D12, a D6, and a D4 – and check the tables. The coin is there in case any binary decisions crop up along the way.

The first table lists 11 powers: whichever I roll, I'm allowed to max out and add to my arsenal. But there's also a 12th spot: rolling that means I have to delete the whole lot. (As Emily starts the game with Far Reach's teleportation ability, I'm considering the base level of that a freebie. I'm also allowing myself the full suite of Agility upgrades, as tiny single-jumps suck.)

The next table is a set of six modifiers to keep things

interesting, and the final one contains instructions for how lethal I'm allowed to be. This time, I rolled an 11 on the D12 (*Shadow Walk*), a 2 on the D4 (*Kill only the target*) and a 3 on the D6 (*Rob the shop*). Those are the rules I'm carrying over to Addermire – which means I'm going to have to kill the target who even the mission's title refers to as 'The Good Doctor'.

Let's cut straight to that encounter, as a half-remembered mental map, in partnership with Shadow Walk, means I'm able to zip across this abandoned hospital at a pace. Dr Alexandria Hypatia gave herself a bad case of the Jekyll-and-Hydes while trying to find a cure for the bloody plague. She's effectively asleep while her monster-self operates as the Crown Killer.

This is why, when I find Hypatia in her lab, her back to me, I can't

SO I TAKE THE MOST LOGICAL COURSE OF ACTION AND MAKE A CORPSE PILE



All these bodies, and not one key. Disgraceful.

CHECK THE TABLES

Want to play along at home? Then get a D4, D6 and D12

D4: LETHALITY

- Non-lethal
- Kill only the target
- Weapons free
- Kill everyone

D6: MODIFIERS

- Black and white
- Turn off HUD
- Rob the shop
- Hard combat
- Hard stealth
- [Free space]

D12: POWERS

- Blink
- Bend Time
- Dark Vision
- Devouring Swarm
- Possession
- Windblast
- Domino
- Doppelganger
- Far Reach
- Mesmerise
- Shadow Walk
- Delete all powers



bring myself to simply pull the trigger and end this quietly. Killing the beast rather than the woman feels... if not more humane, then at least more *sporting*. Besides, it's a chance to play with all those toys I lifted from the shop earlier. I prompt the transformation, then cook off a few grenades and lob them in the general direction of her cackling voice. Boom. Job done. Sorry, Alexandria.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

Back aboard the Dreadful Wale, the ship that ferries me from level to level, I receive a fresh set of orders. From the game: rescue Anton Sokolov, *Dishonored's* answer to Leonardo da Vinci, and eliminate his captor, Kirin Jindosh. And from the dice: 6 – *Windblast*, 1 – *Black and white mode*, 1 – *Non-lethal*. Aww, what? Hypatia has to be murdered, but Jindosh gets spared?

If Sokolov is this game's da Vinci, Jindosh is the [insert name of Silicon Valley billionaire here]. A technologist not hugely bothered about the impact of that tech. Except, instead of enabling conspiracy theorists or slandering

rescue workers on social media, Jindosh is conducting brainwashing experiments on kidnapped human subjects. Somehow, the world of *Dishonored* is an even darker timeline than our own.

Still, you can't help but admire the man's home. The Clockwork Mansion is one of Jindosh's – and Arkane's – masterpieces, a Rubik's Cube of a level that shuffles its walls and floors around you. It's one of the few floorplans in this game I don't have committed to memory, given how complex it is. And turning on the game's black and white filter, which turns everything monochrome except for spilt blood, doesn't make navigating any easier.

There's one bit I do remember clearly, though. Instead of pulling the big lever in the entrance hall, the one that might as well be marked 'obvious trap', I smash the skylight overhead and slip behind the curtain. For a while I'm a ghost, popping out of the walls just long enough to dispense a shot of tranquilliser, grab the body and silently squirrel it away in my crawlspace.

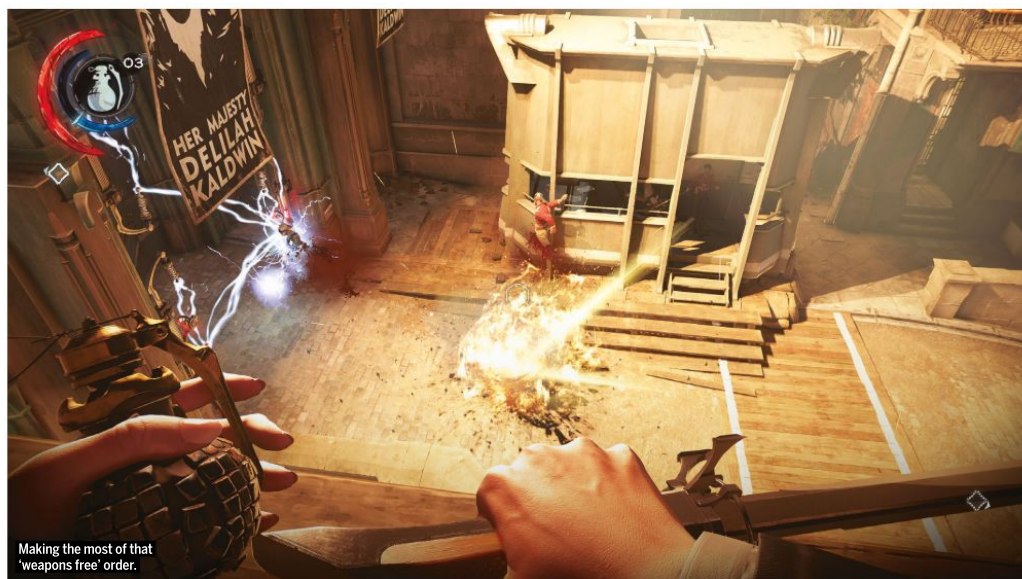
So, when I first come face-to-face with Jindosh's other proudest creation, it's switched off. Even then, the Clockwork Soldier makes for quite a sight. Imagine the Hulk's skeleton, if Bruce Banner decided to indulge in some serious body modification. Or, given the four arms all ending in sharp scythes, if the Grim Reaper decided automation was the future of his industry. (Or, you know, General Grievous.) It's all topped off, for some reason I can't fully fathom, with a giant bird skull made of polished wood like the interior of a luxury car.

Prodding and poking at its mechanisms, I accidentally turn the Clockwork Soldier on. Its gears and magnetic joints whirl into life. Crap, so much for being a sneaky ghost. On the plus side, it lets me play with my new ability. Windblast is basically the Force push ability from Star Wars games, letting me knock down fools like a young Ben Kenobi, but fully-upgraded it's an instant kill. However! The Clockwork Soldiers aren't technically alive, meaning my vow of non-lethality doesn't apply here. Eat my breeze, weird bird-head boy!

This prepares me nicely for the next encounter with one of its robotic kin. This one is playing Minotaur in the labyrinth where Sokolov is imprisoned. I do the action hero thing – rush in, slay the beast, grab my bearded damsel in distress and fling him over one of my shoulders. A quick trip back to the carriage to drop him off (I'm editing out the bit where I get horrifically lost for ages en route) and it's back to Jindosh.

He's guarded by a pair of Clockworks. I have fond memories from previous playthroughs of hijacking them both, setting these Frankensteins loose on their creator. That's not really an option here, though, thanks to the whole non-lethal thing, so I knock out Jindosh from a distance with a tranq dart. This frees me up to drop a stun mine, sneak in close to one Soldier and rewire it, then sneak off with the man while the two duke it out.





Down in the lab, I set up Jindosh's brainwashing chair and drop Jindosh into it. As I pull the lever, the machine sparking into life, he begs me to kill him instead. The chair whisks his brains like so much scrambled egg, and he stammers like a man whose every single thought is just on the tip of his tongue, out of reach. In the grand tradition of *Dishonored's* non-lethal alternatives, I'm not sure it's actually any kinder. But hey, it's what the dice wanted and I must obey.

MUSEUM TOUR

It seems Lady Luck is pleased by my devotion to the rules. Also, she's developed a taste for blood. 1 – *Blink* I'm granted the game's other teleportation power; 4 – *Hard combat* I go into the custom difficulty settings and push everything fight-related to max; 3 – *Weapons free*. I can kill whomever I please. Yes!

This combination turns the Royal Conservatory mission into a bloody speedrun. I explode tanks of whale oil from afar; bring logs tumbling from a transport onto

the heads of enemies, clamber onto an automated watchtower and rewire it to rain missiles on the poor saps below until it drains its own reserve of oil and powers down. This is a side of *Dishonored* I've rarely seen (because I'm usually being all sneaky, sneaky when playing), and it's brilliant – all those carefully-stacked systems toppling unpredictably.

I Blink to the top floor of the museum and dispatch my target with a single lobbed barrel of whale oil (the clear MVP of this level). Then it's just a case of Shadow Walking my way down to the basement for a secondary objective then slinking out the way I came in, past all the lopped-off legs and

heads. The whole thing is, honestly, almost too easy.

But luck is a fickle thing, as anyone who's spent longer than half an hour in a casino will tell you. Back aboard the *Wale* I roll for my next power. The D12 settles on its top edge. I double check the spreadsheet, just to be sure: 12 – *Delete all powers*. This could be interesting. ■

IT SEEMS LADY LUCK IS PLEASED BY MY DEVOTION TO THE RULES



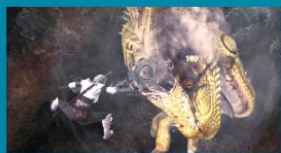


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

CRACKING SKULLS WITH MY BIG HAMMER IN MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

It's slow, but there's nothing like making monster pancakes. *By James Davenport*



LEFT: The blacksmith looks like how I feel about bashing heads in.



Snap. Crackle. Pop. Yes, these are the sounds puffed rice cereal makes when coming into contact with milk. But they are also the sound dinosaur skulls make when coming into contact with my very big and very cool hammer.

I was going to write 'there's something perverse' about it to kick off the next bit, like some coy introspection, but I'm realising that'd just be saying the loud part louder. Yeah, it's nasty. It's worrisome that I like the feeling of concussing an adorable, fuzzy bat that inflates like a balloon. There are plushies of the Paolumu. Google it 'Paolumu cute cartoon' right now. Adorable, yeah? I love to smash its head in.

The hammer isn't like other weapons in *Monster Hunter*, or most other action games. Every swing takes a good second to wind up. It's heavy, so moving around with it unsheathed means you're practically immobile. The hammer requires patience and precision and close study of every monster attack animation. I sit back while my thirsty longsword and insect glaive friends wail on the intensely cute cartoon bat, inflicting it with hundreds of flesh wounds. My time will come. The bat stops to catch its breath, perhaps to consider whether or not this is it, taking a moment to think about those the bat has loved and lost, whether it had done all the huge bat things it had wanted to in life – I destroy the thought, leaping from a slide with a triple front flip, bringing down the hammer on the crest of their skull effectively liquefying the grey matter inside.

Monster Hunter: World is just as sick as I am, possibly sicker, laying down little gamer treats for me to

HEADS TO SMASH, RANKED

Which monster brains look best under my hammer



1 PAOLUMU
It inflates, so I must smash into a fine paste.



2 KULU-YA-KU
It looks like a dodo bird, so, I mean I have to...



3 BARROTH
A huge target, a big rock to disintegrate.



4 KIRIN
Small, fast, but the hammer deletes that electric horn.



5 DIABLO
Those horns gotta go and that won't be a problem.

hoover up on my journey to mastering this outright deranged skill, deflating heads like difficult balloons. To congratulate me for scrambling the Paolumu's brains, sometimes a gem will fly out of a monster's head and an on-screen notification will let me know 'Parts Broken'. I can pick up that little snack during the ensuing break, when the blade crew continues their incessant, mindless blading. I scoop up an extra bit of monster, sheathe my hammer, reposition, and get ready for the next opportunity to smooch the thing's head into the floor.

HAMMER TIME

Sometimes a monster will trip and stay grounded for five to ten seconds. I worry about what happens to my brain while I'm enjoying making theirs basically have to shut down and reboot itself. You get the opportunity – a word I usually save for dream job interviews or fascinating free lectures about the history of statuary or whatever – to just wail on a monster's head with a hammer as big or bigger than it. I just bash and bash and bash with an object the size of an eighth grader that weighs as much as a fridge and would turn any bone and blood adjacent structure into dust and water with a few strong swings. *Monster Hunter: World's* brutal cartoon logic forces these monsters to endure the force and the pain, to live through a nightmare of pain without the physical degradation; or, the freedom of death. And there I am,

feeling rewarded and good about it. Because it is good! And somehow not the horror show I'm describing. It's such an odd, precarious balance. *Monster Hunter: World* renders these creatures with stunning detail. On a PC their skin and fur, expressions, and animations really give the impression of a living creature. It's magical computer puppetry, all propped up in service of being chopped, or in my instance, pounded down. Absolutely pancaked.

The incredible work done in design and QA to make the act of inflicting terrible violence upon

THE HAMMER ISN'T LIKE OTHER WEAPONS IN MONSTER HUNTER

innocent, often cute, creatures satisfying and fun far more than grim and cruel is something that'll always confound me. Like, it's the kinda thing that I can't imagine getting past the first meeting. "Alright so I think we should make the hammer bigger and more impactful and the monsters, like, way more realistic and adorable. They shouldn't be conceived of as preternaturally evil or tainted whatsoever." And now it's one of Capcom's best-selling games in recent history. I'm just thinking about the feeling of the hammer connecting with a Kulu-ya-ku skull and getting a little dopamine hit! So yeah. There's something perverse about it alright. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2018

EXPECT TO PAY
\$25

OUR REVIEW
86%

LINK
monsterhunterworld.com



RIGHT: Please hammer do hurt' em. (This pun is from 1990, thank you very much.)





A dash of conspiracy and the occult spices up the adventure.

BROKEN SWORD: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS

Revisiting a point-and-click classic. *By Andy Kelly*

Broken Sword is a game that knows every great mystery needs a killer premise to hook you in. It begins with an American tourist on vacation in France, sipping coffee outside a Parisian cafe. Then a guy dressed as a clown blows it up. Most people would fly home and try to forget about it, but George Stobbart is not most people: he's an adventure game protagonist. You know what

those guys are like. Vacation be damned, he wants to know who tried to kill him – and he's going to find out by picking up a bunch of random objects and solving puzzles with them.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1996

PUBLISHER
Virgin Interactive

DEVELOPER
Revolution Software

LINK
revolution.co.uk

Developed by UK studio Revolution Software and released in 1996, *Broken Sword* is one of the best point-and-click adventure games ever made. It's beautiful to look at. The puzzles are great. The music is sublime. The characters are memorable. The story is full of twists and turns. And it's funny. Like, really funny. It's everything an adventure game should be, and age hasn't dulled its edge one bit.

Four more *Broken Sword* games were released after this one, and while they all have their moments, the original remains the best in the series by quite a margin.

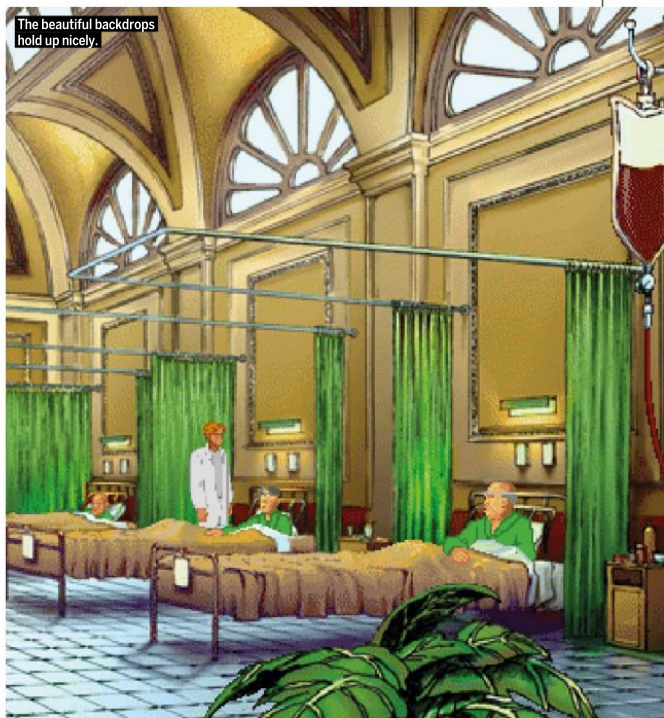
BLADE RUNNER

The key thing is that George is not a detective; he's a lawyer with a goofy sense of humour. But nearly being blown up by a terrorist disguised as a clown inspires him to become one, and reveals a deeper side to him. He's smart, resourceful, and absolutely unshakeable when it comes to the pursuit of justice. He searches the streets (and, more than once, the stinking sewers) of Paris for clues. And as you play, his pockets begin to overflow with objects that may or may not be related to the case. It is a point-and-click adventure game after all.

A plastic red nose. A torn piece of weirdly patterned fabric. An ancient manuscript. A small handful of plaster of Paris. A greasy tissue. Man, he loves showing people that gross tissue. Waving it in front of anyone who'll listen, saying "What does this tissue mean to you?", and awaiting the inevitable disgusted response is one of the game's best running jokes. Every time I meet a new character, it's the first thing I do, just to see their reaction. And the game knows it too, throwing in the odd



Europe's most deadly children's entertainer.



The beautiful backdrops hold up nicely.



unexpected response, or one that takes a subtle dig at you for doing it.

As he investigates the bombing, George finds a partner: a newspaper reporter called Nico Collard, whose apartment George visits regularly throughout the game. They have real chemistry, and I love how their relationship grows over the course of the game. It's one of the best depictions of a friendship forming I've seen in a game. Together the pair find themselves tangled up in an ancient conspiracy that runs far deeper than they ever imagined. The killer clown was just the tip of the iceberg, and one small part of a larger, more complex mystery.

One of the best things about *Broken Sword's* story is how it's all based on real history – specifically the legend of the Knights Templar. As George hunts for the clown, he learns about this ancient order of knights and a treasure hoard they supposedly hid before they were dissolved and their last Grand Master was burned at the stake in Paris. Author Dan Brown famously leaned on the same mythology in his wildly popular book *The Da Vinci Code*, which has a lot in common with

HISTORY LESSON *The Broken Sword series so far*



BS: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS 1996

The game that started it all. Revolution had developed two games before it – *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky* – but this was way ahead of them both in terms of art, design and flair.



BS II: THE SMOKING MIRROR 1997

The second best game in the series. George and Nico's growing relationship makes for some fun moments, the story is great (if not quite as compelling as the original), and the exotic locations provide a great backdrop.



BS: THE SLEEPING DRAGON 2003

The first game in the series to make the leap to three dimensions. Not as artistically sumptuous as its predecessors, and the puzzles get repetitive, but the story is decent and George and Nico are as likeable as ever.



BS: THE ANGEL OF DEATH 2006

Another 3D game, and the first *Broken Sword* to be co-developed with another studio: in this case, Sumo Digital. After the previous game was criticised for having too many action set-pieces, they were reduced in *The Angel of Death*.



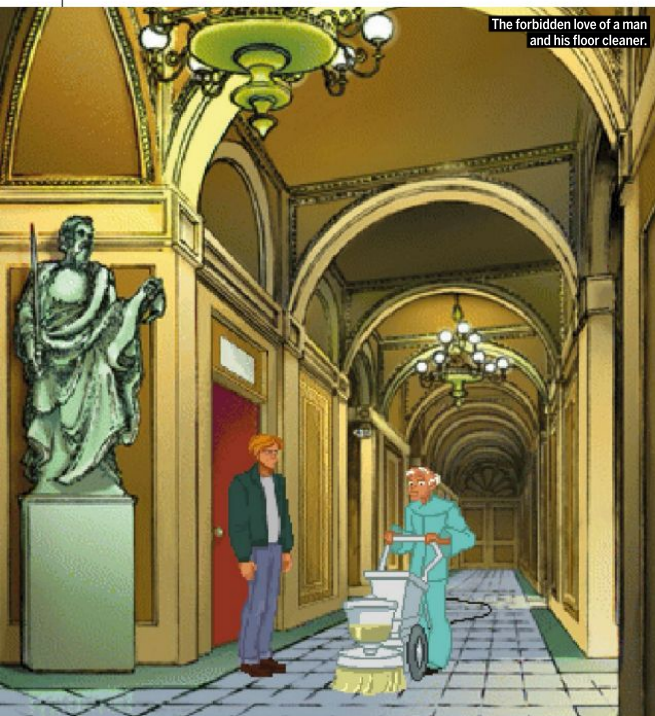
BS 5: THE SERPENT'S CURSE 2013-4

For this return to *Broken Sword's* 2D roots, Revolution raised over \$800,000 via Kickstarter and PayPal donations. Not quite as good as the first two games and a little too easy, but captures some of their magic.

Broken Sword – but Revolution did it first, and did it better.

In *Broken Sword*, the Templars still exist and are trying to take over the world – a plan George and Nico take it upon themselves to stop. It's a compelling mix of real-world history and the occult, wrapped around an

intriguing murder mystery. George's quest for the truth takes him all over the world, from Paris to a sleepy town in Ireland, a Syrian marketplace, a Spanish village, and a train speeding through the Scottish countryside. It's a real globe-trotting adventure, and the colourful,



evocative scenery is constantly changing around you.

Ireland is probably the highlight. George is here following a lead about an archeological dig where a priceless Templar artefact has allegedly been dug up. When he gets there, his first stop is MacDevitt's – a rustic country pub specialising in real ale and frequented by talkative locals. If I could drink a pint in any virtual pub, it would be this one. I like to think I'd be able to handle the booze better than George does here, though. Order one too many and he starts getting rowdy. Well, as rowdy as a Californian lawyer can get. And the barman doesn't seem too keen on his drunken idea to turn MacDevitt's into a trendy cocktail bar.

The overarching story in *Broken Sword* is great, but it's moments like this that make it really special. The quiet moments where the well-written characters are given a chance to shine, and the warm, witty humour comes to the forefront. It's an incredibly cosy game. The slow pace, hand-painted backgrounds, and orchestral music give it a really pleasant atmosphere. If you've ever watched a British detective drama, it

THEATRE OF DREAMS

A brief history of *Broken Sword's* engine

Broken Sword, like most games developed by Revolution Software, uses an in-house engine called Virtual Theatre. The studio was formed in 1990 by Charles Cecil, Tony Warriner, David Sykes, and Noirin Carmody, and its first project was *Lure of the Temptress*. This fantasy adventure game (which is now free on GOG) was the debut of the Virtual Theatre system, which

would see characters moving around the world, travelling between locations, and following simple routines – around which many of the puzzles were designed. *Broken Sword*, however, doesn't actually utilise Virtual Theatre to the same degree, but an iteration of the engine has been in almost every Revolution game to date, including its latest, *Beyond a Steel Sky*.



has a similar vibe. Thrilling, exciting, but in a pretty subtle way, with lots of nice scene-setting and quirky, light-hearted conversations in between all the murders.

George meets a lot of memorable characters, including a hospital cleaner whose best friend is a floor

polishing machine called Mr Shiny, a detective convinced he has psychic powers, and a mischievous youngster called Liam Maguire who tries to rope him into a scheme to steal him a crate of lager. And who can forget Lady Pierremont, an obscenely posh hotel guest with a plummy English accent who helps George pilfer the key to a room through sheer upper class arrogance. I love all these weirdos, and their voices are forever etched into my mind.

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

The voice acting, incidentally, is brilliant. It's quite scrappy in places, occasionally sounding like it was recorded in a bathroom stall. (It might have been; Revolution was a small studio at the time.) But that only adds to its charm. And actor Rolf Saxon (who has appeared in a bunch of stuff, including *Tomorrow Never Dies*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Mission: Impossible*) is perfect as George Stobbart. In fact, I don't know if the character would work half as well without him. He brings just the right amount of warmth and deadpan humour to the role, but with a tough, determined edge – which mirrors the



Probably nothing suspicious happening here.

BROKEN SWORD'S ANIMATION IS ALSO UNBELIEVABLY LAVISH AND EXPRESSIVE

two sides of the character. *Broken Sword's* animation is also unbelievably lavish and expressive, which is another important part of why its characters are so memorable. The way they move says as much about them as their voices, whether it's Lady Pierremont's indignant march towards the reception desk at the hotel, or Sean Fitzgerald twitching and eyeing the door nervously in MacDevitt's, visibly worried about something. Artistically, it's one of the prettiest and most atmospheric adventure games of the period. And even though it looks quite low-res and pixelated on big, modern monitors, the quality of the art direction shines through.

But as laid back as *Broken Sword* is, you can still die. Mistakes that lead to George's untimely demise are usually clearly signposted, but you won't be able to resist putting him into dangerous situations to see what

happens. You can always reload. Honestly, these scenes feel kind at odds with the rest of the game. It's quite jarring to go from this fun, silly, rip-roaring adventure, to lovely, goofy George being given a pair of concrete shoes by some shady gangsters and thrown into the Seine. It does at least add a sprinkle of genuine danger to the game.

BAAAA HUMBUG

Of course, you can't talk about *Broken Sword* without mentioning the goat puzzle. It stumped so many people that it even has its own Wikipedia page. It's actually pretty simple. When the goat knocks you down, quickly click the old plough on the other side of the screen to trap it. The problem is, there are no other timing-based puzzles in the game. None up until that point, and none after. So you can understand why it has most players reaching for a walkthrough. However, if you're playing the *Director's Cut* version of *Broken Sword*, the timing element has been removed entirely, making the goat puzzle not so infamous.

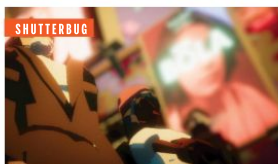
But which version should you play? The *Director's Cut* is excellent,

adding a whole new prologue chapter where you play as Nico, new puzzles, neat character portraits by Dave 'Watchmen' Gibbons, a nicely designed hint system, and more. But some elements I'm not so keen on, like the comic book-style text bubbles. I personally prefer playing the original version on ScummVM, because it's the one I remember playing when I first discovered the game. But either way, you're gonna have a good time, and the *Director's Cut* is only £5 on Steam.

It's a shame that dumb goat puzzle is what most people think of when they hear the name *Broken Sword*, because it's really the least interesting thing about it. This is a smart, funny and deeply charming adventure game, and still wonderfully playable today. The puzzle design is mostly logical and even-handed, rarely slipping into the brain-twisting absurdism of many other point-and-click adventures from the mid-to-late '90s. Wacky puzzles, while a staple of the genre, don't age well, which I think is part of *Broken Sword's* enduring appeal. It's a game I play at least once a year, and every time I do, the magic is still there. ■

NAT
CLAYTON

Tragically, Nat became a competitive *Splatoon 2* player this spring. But since the PC in PC Gamer doesn't stand for 'Pro Cephalopod', here are eight desktop games she reckons are actually quite good.



UMURANGI GENERATION

umurangi.tapiki.io

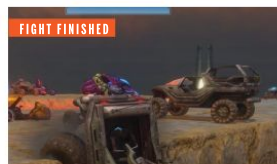
→ *Umurangi Generation* is loud, angry, and unabashedly political in a way that puts the rest of the medium to shame. But it's the virtual handheld camera that sells it, asking you to create art for art's sake at the end of the world. Say cheese, giant squid. You'll be like the David Bailey of a dying dystopia.



TEARDOWN

teardowngame.com

→ I know there's a good, smart heist game buried under *Teardown*'s phenomenal destruction tech. But since adding Steam Workshop support, I've left those crime puzzles behind to go yeet buildings at other buildings with *GMod*-inspired gravity guns. Why steal a safe when you can steal a skyscraper?



HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

halowaypoint.com

→ It's 2007. Toby McGuire's Spider-Man just went emo, everyone's listening to Avril Lavigne's Girlfriend, and your mates are playing CTF on Valhalla all night long. Thankfully, that last one hasn't aged as poorly. Fourteen years on, *Halo 3* is still the best shooter around.



UNBEATABLE: ARCADE MIX

unbeatablegame.com

→ This sun-bleached anime beat-basher isn't out until 2023 at the earliest. But what's a few years if not plenty of time to practice with the game's killer *Arcade Mix* demo? *Unbeatable* is already a damn good rhythm game, and even just as a demo it's the coolest thing I've played so far this year.

MUST

★

PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Nat Clayton



KENSHI

lofigames.com

→ My old drinking buddy Dirt lies dead on some far-off hillside. I found him topless in a bar out west, clutching his old man's sword. That blade got us far enough to put a shirt on him, but didn't do much when the dogs came howling. Shame, that. Oh well, I guess I'll just have to find a new drinking pal.



AN AFTERNOON RIPPLING

marslizard.net/afternoon

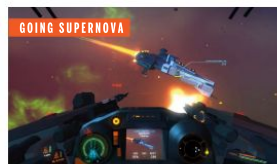
→ I miss the ephemeral nature of travel. Poker games played in the wee hours over bad wine. Drug-fuelled parties in caves older than history. Old men offering rides on reindeer-driven sleds. Folk bands performing in a lake. Which of those were mine, and which take place in this lo-fi road trip?



PYRE

supergiantgames.com/games/pyre

→ Forget *Hades*. *Pyre* is truly Supergiant's thirstiest game – y'all just weren't ready to see it. We've got giant horned ladies, tormented spirit assassins, suave tree-men, and a lovely, wholesome lad for the *Zagreus* fans out there. The underworld may be hot, but it's got nothing on the Downside.



HOUSE OF THE DYING SUN

dyingungame.com

→ You are hate incarnate. The screaming death throes of a dying empire. The cruel twist at the end of someone else's story. You are beyond death. The final gong rung by a house that'll see the galaxy burn before it falls in silence. Fortunately, you're also a pretty good and fun space dogfighter.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | Tel: 01225 442244 | Email: letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

Brand Director Tim Clark
Global Editor-in-Chief Evan Lahti

PC GAMER UK

Editor-in-Chief, UK Phil Savage
Print Editor Robin Valentine
Online Editor, UK Fraser Brown
Features Producer Andy Kelly
News Editor Rich Stanton
Guides Editor Harry Shepherd
Staff Writer Rachel Watts
Guides Writer Emma Matthews
Art Editor John Strike
Production Editor Tim Empey
Video Producer Graeme Meredith
Hardware Lead Dave James
Senior Hardware Editor Alan Dexter
Senior Hardware Editor Jacob Ridley
Hardware Writer Katie Wickens
Trainee News Writer Mollie Taylor
News Writer Nat Clayton

PC GAMER US

Executive Editor Tyler Wilde
Senior Editor Wes Fenlon
Senior Reporter Steven Messner
Features Producer James Davenport
Features Producer Chris Livingston
Weekend Editor Jody Macgregor
News Lead Andy Chalk
Hardware Writer Jorge Jimenez
Staff Writer Morgan Park

CONTRIBUTORS

Jon Bolding, Matt Elliott, Ian Evenden, Phil Iwaniuk, Luke Kemp, Matt Killeen, Jeremy Laird, Rick Lane, Julie Muncy, Jeremy Peel, Alex Spencer, Tom Sykes, Eric Watson, Robert Zak, Rob Crossland

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations David Lyttleton

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor Steve Wright
Editorial Operations Assistant Nick Lee

PRODUCTION

Head of Production US & UK Mark Constance
Production Project Manager Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller Jason Hudson
Production Manager Fran Twentyman

ADVERTISING

Commercial Director Clare Dove
Advertising Director Tom Parkinson
Account Director Jeff Jones
Account Manager Kevin Stoddart

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

Head of Print Licensing Rachel Shaw

SUBSCRIPTIONS & CIRCULATION

Head of subscriptions Sharon Todd
Head of Newstrade Tim Mathers

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Managing Director, Games, Photo, Design, and Video Matt Pierce
Commercial Finance Director Dan Jotcham
Head of Art & Design Rodney Dive
Group Art Director, Games Warren Brown

SUBSCRIPTIONS Email: contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk | **UK orderline:** 0344 848 2852 | **International orderline:** +44 (0)344 848 2852 | www.magazinesdirect.com

DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU | **Tel:** 0203 787 9001 | www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2021 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.



Gibcos! It's "Brasik", and it has something to do with tigers. I'm not sure if it's safe to drink an entire litre of Gibcos, but hey, as the label says, "The Night Just Started".

HOUSEHOLD HORROR

Investigating the scariest part of *Resident Evil Village*: the labels



There's something very intense about your hand cream claiming to be according to the natural law. At least we know its target audience - lethargic women.



'O'Sprays' is a little questionable as the name of a shower gel, but I'll give it a pass. "Nature's Milk" revitalising toner. I have a problem with. Isn't nature's milk just milk?



The label looking like it was drawn by a child is a little disconcerting, but it's hard to pass up "free, fresh" wipes. And look, an endorsement - "Forgive me, I'm so good that you will never forget". Am.



I'm pretty sure 'half-whole flour' isn't a thing, but much more confusing is the slogan right at the bottom: "All Of The Good Boys And Girls In The World Do The Channel Pop." No they?

...UNTIL
JUNE
24



£499.99

Impulse

AMD IMPULSE (Ryzen 7)

AMD Ryzen 5 2600 - 6 Cores (O.C 4Ghz)
ASUS PRIME B450M-A
CORSAIR 8GB DDR4 3000Mhz
INTEL 512GB M.2 NVME 660P
AMD RX 560 2GB
GAMEMAX Expedition
MICROSOFT Windows 10 or 10 Pro



£599.99

mercury

INTEL i5 MERCURY (Core i5)

INTEL Core i5 9600K (O.C 5Ghz)
ASUS PRIME Z390-P
CORSAIR 16GB DDR4 3000Mhz
INTEL 1TB M.2 NVME 660P
INTEL UHD 630 Integrated Graphics
KOLINK Stronghold
MICROSOFT Windows 10 or 10 Pro



£1249.99

NAVIGATOR

AMD NAVIGATOR (Ryzen 8)

AMD Ryzen 5 3600X (O.C 4.3Ghz)
ASUS TUF X570-Plus Gaming
CORSAIR 16GB DDR4 3600Mhz - RGB
INTEL 512GB M.2 NVME 660P
SEAGATE 2TB Sata3 HDD
AMD 5700XT 8GB
CORSAIR iCUE 220T RGB White
MICROSOFT Windows 10 or 10 Pro

palicomp

01270 898 104
sales@palicomp.co.uk

*Sales subject to our terms of sale available online - www.palicomp.co.uk - Configuration issues will be advised by phone - any alternatives will also be advised by phone before proceeding with the order.
Systems Custom built then are tested 100% prior to dispatch - dispatched via courier for next working day delivery - other delivery options available online. 0% Finance upto 12 months only - terms online - early settlement fee just £29.00 - apply online or phone. Prices inclusive of VAT and free UK mainland shipping. Q-jump cut-off time 15.00pm.

G SERIES

DESIGNED TO POWER YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE

THE NEW DELL G15 GAMING LAPTOP

Commit to the game with the new Dell G15 gaming laptop.
It sacrifices nothing, so you can experience everything with powerful
graphics and Game Shift technology.

VISIT [DELL.CO.UK](https://www.dell.co.uk)



©2021 Dell, Inc., or its subsidiaries. All Rights Reserved. Dell, EMC, and other trademarks are trademarks of Dell, Inc. or its subsidiaries. ©2021 ArenaNet, LLC. All rights reserved. Guildwars 2 and Guildwars 2 logo are registered trademarks and/or trademarks of ArenaNet, LLC. All product titles, publisher names, trademarks, artwork and associated imagery are trademarks, registered trademarks and/or copyright material of the respective owners. All rights reserved. Model name Dell G15 gaming laptop.